

小説

藤崎都

Miyuki Fujisaki

原作&
まんが

中村春菊

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吉野千秋の場合

世界初恋

セカイイチハツコイ

角川ルビ一文庫

Sekaiichi Hatsukoi: Yoshino

Chiaki no Baai (VOL.1)

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「CHAPTER 1」

“It's boring,” said the man sitting in front of him as he tossed the thick stack of papers on the desk.

“Wha-!” Hearing that, Yoshino Chiaki was immediately about to complain, but squeezing his fists on his lap and grinding his teeth, he refrained from shouting at his companion.

Calm down! Listen to what he has to say first.....

He decided to hold back for now. There would be time to argue later. Yoshino gulped down the water placed before him in one go and waited for Hatori Yoshiyuki's - the editor in charge of him - explanation. Yoshino Chiaki's pen name was Yoshikawa Chiharu. He was a top-notch shoujo manga artist. He started drawing manga since he was a student, and now the 28 year old was popular.

After Hatori glared at Yoshino, he tapped at the storyboard with his finger and spat out, “Were you writing this thinking it was good? What the hell is this? It's obvious you thought that anything would pass since 'The storyboard of the great manga artist Yoshikawa Chiharu sold one million copies.' Don't be arrogant, you idiot.”

“....,” Yoshino was silent. He was furious at these words. He wrote the storyboard with so much earnest, only to have it heavily criticized. There is no manga artist who would not have his pride shattered in such situations. Yoshino jumped up from his chair with a clatter and confronted Hatori, shouting.

“When was I arrogant?! When did I do my work thinking it was good? Besides, even if you are my childhood friend, you're talking back to an author when you're just an editor. How can you speak to me that way?!”

But Hatori continued to reply coolly, “Talking back to an author? Speaking to you that way? Ha! There's your arrogance.”

Yoshino swallowed hard, realizing he had said too much. He became quiet, at a loss for words, as he sadly sat back down in his seat. This was a dispute which would have attracted attention, but fortunately, it's not that he always used this cafe for business meetings at this time, rather he felt that usually few customers were here, just as there was no one but the part-time clerk and the shop manager at the moment.

Since both the manager and the young part-time clerk have gotten completely used to the bickering coming from Yoshino and his companion, the quarrel did not disturb the air in the cafe and the men remained absorbed in their work.

It's boring...?

He couldn't deny that this time even he, himself, had little confidence in the storyboard. However, while he was pondering on it, it slowly began to make no sense to him, but the deadline had come and before long the storyboard was due.

Where is it bad? I'll quickly fix it for now, and then make him say it's interesting.

Yoshino was burning partially with a desire for revenge and looked over the storyboard again.

Then after some time, Hatori spoke, "The theme isn't bad. But, there's too much detail."

"Huh?"

"I understand there are many things you want to draw. But are you thinking of the readers when you're drawing?"

".....Oh....."

Now that he mentioned it, Yoshino thought Hatori was probably right. He wanted to include this and that in his drawings, so it ended up messy. Yoshino seized this opportunity to work out the tangled story, and continued to be absorbed in fixing the storyboard. While he was fixing the storyboard, Yoshino stole a glance at Hatori.

Hatori was sipping coffee while looking over the manuscript with a frown. Even though he was an editor, Hatori wore a suit and necktie. Yoshino thought it seemed as if he was displaying a serious character. Hatori did not have a dashing appearance, but he was good-looking due to his double eyelids and clear-cut features. If he didn't furrow his brows, he would be quite a handsome man.

While Yoshino was gazing at Hatori's troublesome face, he was complaining to himself in his head.

I mean, just because we're childhood friends and don't need to be on polite terms, isn't he speaking a little bit more superior to me?

Despite thinking that, Yoshino couldn't bring himself to say it. He was certain that if he said anything he would be returned with words several times as harsh. Whenever Hatori faced Yoshino, he was cruel and gave out strict orders.

Did Hatori also do this to other writers?

Certainly Hatori's pointers were correct and it was true that the storyboard became interesting when he took Hatori's advice. The strange thing was that Yoshino was grateful for it, without a doubt.

But... couldn't he at least be a little bit more nicer to me?

Even if he thought that, he expected to be told 'Don't act like a spoiled brat', so in the end he didn't plan on saying it.

“This scene is important. But what are you doing getting rid of it by inserting a gag?”

“Ah... I see. That's right... Here?”

Sure enough, as if Hatori's single advice had cleared up the fog, the solution became clear for him.

His guesses are almost like he reads my mind – as if he knew I was worried just now. How does he always know?

“What's wrong? You still don't get it?” Hatori called out to Yoshino, because Yoshino's hand had stopped moving and he was gazing off into space.

“Shut up! I get it!”

After Yoshino raised his voice and glared at Hatori, he remembered the storyboard - which he had to do somehow - was above everything else and he quickly set about making corrections on paper.

While he was working on it and wrecking his head in frustration, Hatori said to him with a manner like he just remembered something - “That reminds me, you have another offer for an autograph session from a bookstore. As usual, I'm going to refuse it, but I thought I'd tell you just in case. You don't want to do it, right? The autograph session.”

“Yeah, thanks. Apologize to the bookstore for me.”

Autograph sessions were also one of the jobs for an author. No, it wasn't really a job. There was no reward in particular, even if you were stuck there the whole day, so you could perhaps say it was more like a service rather than work.

However, the autograph sessions were the only chance for an author to be able to connect with the readers who were on the other side of the page. Let's say that it was the most irreplaceable experience. Frankly speaking, even Yoshino wanted to do the autograph session. However, it was a problem that shoujo manga artist 'Yoshikawa Chiharu' was a man.

Well, I wasn't planning on hiding, but everyone misunderstood and thought I was a woman. So I let it stay that way.....

In addition, since his real name was 'Chiaki', generally a girl's name, it seemed like even the editorial committee didn't think he was a man. At the very most, probably only the editor-in-chief –Takano - and Hatori knew this fact. Nowadays, it was not unusual for a man to draw shoujo manga. Moreover, the first shoujo manga were nearly all drawn by men artists, so he believed he didn't have to be too worried about that.

Besides, the fact that a popular shoujo manga artist was a young man would probably become popular with the public, so being a man shoujo manga artist was not necessarily confined only to have a negative image.

Nevertheless, Yoshino was a man for himself and wanted to avoid being exposed. The majority of the readers were girls and thought 'Yoshikawa Chiharu' was a woman. After they were so convinced that Yoshino was a woman, they confided to him in fan-letters. If those readers found out that such sparkly shoujo manga was drawn by a man, they would probably be very disappointed. It was much better to be thought of as a delicate woman, who couldn't show herself in front of people due to her being shy, than let his fans be disappointed. That is what Yoshino thought.

“I think it won't ruin your image even if people found out you were a man.”

“But, don't you think the readers can enjoy the manga more if they don't know the artist's face?”

“I think they would rather prefer to see the artist's face.”

“The artist's face... The face of an average, ordinary man?”

Yoshino looked closely at his own face in the reflection of the window. He wasn't sloppy, but he didn't think he was a type that was fun to look at. His eyes were large but they were droopy looking, and he had a baby face. Moreover, his hair was unkempt since all he did was just fix his bed hair halfheartedly. Come to think of it, he had gone to the hair salon and hadn't been there since after the last time the deadline was near.

He was an indoor guy, so he was on the thin side. In addition to that, his body hair was sparse, so he only grew a little bit of fluffy facial hair. It really bothered him that he had no manly features. Yoshino was jealous of the man in front of him who didn't look like he exercised much but had a nice tall physique anyway.

"You wouldn't understand that kind of thing. And, uh ... well, it's better that you don't appear much in front of people. It's safer for me that way.

"Huh? What?"

Yoshino asked him nonchalantly. He didn't hear the words Hatori quietly added at the end.

"Never mind. It's nothing." With that, Hatori once again dropped his glance at the manuscript.

Yoshino already experienced this. He knew he wouldn't get an answer from Hatori now no matter how much he questioned him, so he didn't say anything further.

If he wants to say something, he should just come out and say it. No, why do I want him to say it? I probably won't be able to make a quick come back if he says any more.

He thought back to Hatori's reaction when he showed him the storyboard and immediately took it back. On another note, his childhood friend Hatori had been friends with him from about the time they were born, because they grew up together in the same neighborhood. When they were in university, the departments they majored in were different, but since they took the same route there, their friendship remained quite long and inseparable.

"Anyway, you said you wanted to use fireworks or something in your next story, right? After we get this published, why don't we go to the fireworks display at the riverbank near our neighborhood? We could collect data while we're there."

“I'll go! I'll go! I haven't seen fireworks with you since high school! The road that leads to the display is along a shopping mall, and if I remember correctly there are food stands there! I want to eat a caramel apple!”

Up until the time they were high school students, Yoshino went to the fireworks display often with Hatori. He had forgotten when they stopped going there, and instead of the fireworks rising one by one, the only memories which came floating into his head were the food stands that he was crazy about back in those days.

“Ok. Except, I'm not buying you a caramel apple. You buy it yourself.”

“I said I'll buy it myself!”

“In the meantime, if I don't get the corrections for the storyboard, you can forget about going. I think you can concentrate better if you do them at home,” said Hatori, and went off toward the cash register holding the check.

“Ah! Wait up!”

He gathered up the papers scattered all over the desk, shoved them into his folder, and ran after Hatori who finished paying and was trying to leave.

“Hey Tori, are you going back to the office after this?”

“No. I OK'ed the proofs. I was working on my day off today. This was my only business meeting, so I'm going home now.”

Hearing his reply, Yoshino made a small victory dance in his head.

“Well then, why don't you come to my place? I'm craving for some of your warm homemade cooking! I'll finish the storyboard by the end of the day!”

As Yoshino persuaded Hatori to cook him dinner in exchange for the storyboard, Hatori wrinkled his forehead. At that very moment, from the look on his face, Yoshino could see he was troubled.

“Don't make that face. I'll make sure that you can say it's interesting next time! Okay?”

“..... All right.”

“YES! I'm so lucky!”

Finally Hatori gave in and it was decided that he would make dinner for him at Yoshino's house. It's been a while since Yoshino had a decent meal and he was in high spirits. Hatori's homecooked meals were really delicious.

“Then, lets go to the supermarket.”

“Okay!”

His relationship with Hatori had become completely work related, however at this moment he felt that they went back to being old friends. The sun was almost about to set and somehow it appeared nostalgic to him.

* * * *

“You're amazing!! The best! Your mother will be proud of you even when you're better than your future wife.” Yoshino was overwhelmed with delight and praised Hatori as he was eating the dinner Hatori had prepared for him. But the way Yoshino had said it was too exaggerated, so Hatori hit him on the head. “Oww! I'm complimenting you.....seriously!”

“Don't play around. Hurry up and eat.”

With this cold reply given to him, Yoshino resumed his meal unsatisfied.

It's delicious as usual.....

Yoshino continued eating and was once again impressed with the meal placed before him. All of Hatori's meals tasted delicious and also looked appetizing. It seemed Hatori was better at making Japanese food than Western food, but if it turns out Hatori is indeed better at cooking than his future girlfriends, then the girls would have a hard time competing with him.

“Come to think of it, I wonder if he has a girlfriend right now?”

In the old days, Hatori would sometimes talk to him about his girlfriends, but now he didn't talk about such things at all and it didn't look like there was even a sign that he had a girlfriend at the time being.

“Hey Tori. Do you have a girlfriend right now?”

When something starts to bother Yoshino, he doesn't stop himself, so he blurted out the question without thinking. Hatori was just about to start eating when his chopsticks stopped in midair.

Oh, of course. I just randomly asked him.

Yoshino was often scolded by Hatori with 'You don't say enough'.

He thought many things to himself, but since he said only a fraction of it, people around him couldn't follow along with him. Because of that, he was often misunderstood. And in turn, this also caused him to have arguments.

But even in this situation it was only Hatori who always deliberately stopped Yoshino from arguing with others. Hatori understood him probably because of their lengthy friendship. However, Yoshino thought it was because Hatori was mostly always composed and smarter than anyone. Of course, occasionally Hatori irritated him, but often times he was really glad he was his friend.

“.....Why do you ask that?”

“No, it's just you used to be super popular. Even now, you work for the best publishing company and I thought that maybe you have a girlfriend or something.”

Hatori's cooking was so good that when Yoshino spoke he said it with his mouth full of food, causing Hatori to let out a small laugh.

“I'd like that. Thanks to someone though, I've been on a leash for a while now, so I'm far from having free time to date. I don't have time to find myself a partner. So what are you going to do to make up for it?”

“Uh.....”

Hatori's voice held no bitterness, but he thought Hatori was right, so Yoshino suddenly felt ashamed. Nevertheless, even though he felt bad, he searched for an excuse to say that perhaps it wasn't only his fault.

“Well, that's . . . It's not just me. You know you have other authors to be in charge of . . .” Yoshino avoided the question with a laugh, but was once again hit by Hatori.

“You're the worst out of them all,” Hatori shot out a cold reply.

However, with regard to the slow progression of the manuscript, Yoshino felt guilty, so there was no room for him to argue back. How many times had he made Hatori stay up all night with him? How many times had he made him apologize to the printers?

“ . . . I'm sorry . . . ”

If he said anything more, he might create problems for himself. Without giving it anymore thought, Yoshino decided to concentrate on eating.

Hatori quietly ate his dinner as well, but suddenly stopped his chopsticks and softly muttered, “ . . . There is someone I like.”

“What!? Seriously!? That's surprising... Tori has someone he likes...”

Hatori's confession truly surprised him. As far as he could remember, Hatori was never attached to any specific person or thing. Even if there were girls who dated Hatori, they were the ones who always confessed to him and they were the ones who always dumped him. The thing Hatori was most concerned with was that he really wanted to work as an editor of a publishing company.

For Tori to come to like someone... I wonder what sort of person she is?

Yoshino's curiosity grew, and he began to question him with interest.

“Did you already confess?”

“No.”

“Then, it's one-sided?”

“I think so.....”

Leaning forward, Yoshino asked him eagerly. But contrary to his expectations, Hatori didn't want to talk much about it in great detail.

Even so, a one-sided love, huh?

What was a handsome man like Hatori hesitating about? If he confessed, certainly it would all go well. When Hatori had been looking for a job at a publishing company, which was his only concern at that time, he was collecting information about the companies as much as he could, so he was completely prepared for finding work. At the time of the Employment Ice Age (a prolonged time period in Japan when there was unemployment), he received private offers from some companies. He decided to choose the one, which appeared to be the best out of them all.

Or maybe he was being careful because it was his first true love?

Hatori had not expected this but for some reason Yoshino was excited.

“Well? Well? What's she like? Beautiful?”

“Beautiful..... perhaps more impudent,” Hatori acted strange, hesitating to speak, and Yoshino casually pried further.

“Really?! Really?! And?”

“. . . I don't think I'll get anything out of it,” Hatori was lost in his thoughts for some time, then he sighed and it didn't look like he would say anything further.

I wonder if I asked something wrong?

As the awkwardness filled the air, Yoshino thought back to how he had been inconsiderate. He couldn't think of a way to break through this atmosphere, and only the sound of them eating could be heard inside the room. If he knew it would turn out like this, he wished he had turned on the T.V. earlier. Then at that moment, the doorbell rang.

“Who could that be at this hour?”

He wasn't finished with the storyboard yet, so he had not called on his assistants. No, supposing he had called on them, Yoshino would not let them come this evening. When he rose from his seat, thinking it was probably the delivery service or something, the visitor entered the home without waiting for the owner's response. It appeared he had not locked the door.

“Chiaki! I bought volume fourteen of 'Odd Chef: The Kan'!!” Yanase Yuu stepped inside as if this was his own home. He always entered without permission, so naturally Yoshino was not angry with him, but with the long-awaited new issue of the comic right in front of him, the tension he felt in the room immediately lifted.

“No way! It's out already!? And that's the limited edition!!”

Yoshino was under pressure to meet the deadline, and had neglected to check the release date for the new issue of the comic, so he accidentally missed the chance to preorder it and looked at the book with envy. His heart beat with excitement.

“Hee-hee, it's awesome, right?”

“It is! It is!!”

Yanase had been friends with Yoshino and Hatori since middle school and now worked as Yoshino's chief assistant. Yanase and Yoshino aspired to become manga artists, but Yanase gave up on that dream because he wasn't talented enough and switched to become a professional assistant, which still made use of his outstanding drawing skills. He was beautiful, just like a cat with slanted eyes. At first glance, he didn't appear to be the type that likes manga, but the truth was that he was just as much of an otaku as Yoshino. In the old days, Yoshino and Yanase bonded over this same hobby. When they were university students, the two had lent each other comics and talked about them enthusiastically. It was still like that now.

“Where did you buy it?”



“The usual place. The store was almost closing, so I thought it was already too late, but I went there just in case and I somehow got it.”

“You're the best, Yuu! Lend it to me when you finish reading!!”

“I'm giving it to you. It's your copy, Chiaki,” Yanase laughed. He had bought two copies for himself, one for reading and the other for collection.

“Wow, really!? Thank you!” Yoshino accepted Yanase's kindness with gratitude; happily took the comic offered to him, and opened the package while standing.

Watching them intently Hatori cut in, “Yoshino, that's bad manners.”

“Ah, sorry,” Yoshino apologized, but couldn't take his eyes from the book.

He waited four months for the newly published 'Odd Chef: The Kan'; there was no way he could wait anymore. For the sake of reading everything in one go, he had to hold himself back from reading each chapter in the monthly magazines. When Yoshino was completely absorbed in the comic, Yanase acted as if he just now noticed Hatori, who continued his meal.

“Oh, you're here too Hatori,” he called out to him.

“Unfortunately. Weren't you at Satou's studio?”

Was it just his imagination that it felt like Hatori's tone of voice held some unpleasantness? And Yanase's voice also contained sarcasm, somehow.

“It looks like the storyboard got delayed and I'm ahead of schedule, so I'm going there tomorrow. If you have time to just sit here, why don't you urge Satou to hurry up with the rough sketches?”

“You don't have to tell me. I'm about to go there now.”

Yoshino slowly began to drift away from the comic as he noticed that they sounded like they were arguing. These two had known each other for a long time, but it seemed like they couldn't quite get along and it was impossible for them to be on good speaking terms with one another. If it weren't for him, they would not be speaking to each other at all.

Um..... What's with this atmosphere?

It was particularly hostile today. Usually, they made sure their relationship was like that of a pair of cats, uninterested in each other.

“Yoshino, I'll be leaving now. I'm sorry I can't clean up. When you're finished with the storyboard corrections, send them to my office.”

“Ah, okay.”

Hatori wasn't done with dinner, but did not have an excuse to stay if he was told there was work to be done elsewhere.

“Then, take care,” Hatori said briefly, took a last bite of the meal, and left.

“That guy is as busy as always! Oh, as long as I'm already here, I want to discuss work. When should I come in next time? As usual, it's up to you, so send me the schedule when you can.”

Yanase's art skills were superb and as an assistant, he was in high demand everywhere. He was Yoshino's old childhood friend, and Yoshino was quite thankful that Yanase always gave him first priority.

“Ah, wait a sec.”

A while ago, he had arranged a rough schedule with Hatori. He compared the calendar with the schedule in his notebook, and began to write down the days he wanted Yanase to come in.

“..... So, he made all this food?

“Yeah, I asked him to. I've been dying for some decent food lately. After that, he did my laundry, too.”

Yoshino answered without giving it too much thought as he handed Yanase the piece of paper he had just finished writing the schedule on.

While Yanase was looking it over, he asked him suspiciously, “..... Again?”

“Yeah,” Yoshino nodded as if to say it was only natural.

“Hm..... Aren't you relying on Hatori too much?”

“..... “

After a few minutes, Yoshino considered replying casually to him, but Yanase had attacked his weak spot. He was startled by how accurate Yanase's point was, so he was at a loss for words and couldn't argue back.

It certainly was exactly as Yanase had pointed out. He really did have the tendency to rely on Hatori too much. His childhood friend Hatori was in charge of him and Yoshino had not planned to work with him, but Yoshino would never have received

the same treatment like he got from Hatori if editor's from other companies were in charge of him. He felt slightly disgusted with himself, even though another person had pointed this out to him.

I'm so useless.....

From the beginning, he took it for granted that Hatori assisted him without being asked to. Hatori cooked for him and did his laundry; and Yoshino couldn't get by without him. Yoshino's shoulders slumped; he looked miserable. Then Yanase, who was looking at the schedule, suddenly asked, “..... Hey, about this schedule, are you doing the corrections for the storyboard today, the ones Hatori talked about a while ago?”

“Yeah, actually.....”

Like always, he was just barely making progress with the storyboard; he scoffed at himself. Yanase picked his bag up from the floor and fixed it on his shoulder, as he said, “All right then, I'll go home for today. I don't want to get in your way.”

“Ah... Sorry you had to come all the way here for me.”

“No, I'll see you all the time next week. I'm satisfied for now.”

“Wha-?”

“Take a break and read the comic.”

“Ah, okay. Thank you...”

What in a world did he mean by “satisfied”?

Yoshino didn't quite understand what he had meant and he tilted his head to one side as he saw Yanase off at the front door.

“Do I really rely on him too much.....?”

Yanase's comment from a while ago bothered him, but the word “reliance” bothered him much more. Yanase was always around him and Hatori, so naturally he must be right about this. Yoshino slowly went back to the dinning room and collapsed in the dinning chair.

“But then, what should I do?”

However, if he thought about his relationship with Hatori, as author and editor, he could probably say it was getting too personal, but if he considered their relationship as friends, he felt like it was becoming more distant than before. Certainly, that was due to their positions as author and editor. Besides, Hatori had other authors to be in charge of,

so Yoshino was conscious of the fact that Hatori can't favor only him. It was a matter of course, no doubt about it.

“That's why Tori never complains. I'm to blame.....”

He was aware of this and thought perhaps he should change his attitude. Surely the line between friendship and work was becoming indefinite, and this complicated relationship with Hatori was turning into “reliance”, just like Yanase told him it was.

Still, we're not fighting now, so it'll be strange to change my attitude all of a sudden. What in the world should I do?

Lately, all they talked about was work. The only times they saw each other was during business meetings and when the deadline was approaching.

“Come to think of it, he doesn't talk about himself.....”

Ever since Hatori became in charge of Yoshino, he had not talked about his own private life. It was probably because work is naturally a workingman's top priority, but even though, ever since they were both university students, every time Hatori fell in love and said ‘There is someone I like’ - just like he did a while ago - he always told Yoshino when he started seeing that someone and when they broke up. In those days, Hatori thought that there was no need to tell him such things in detail, but Hatori was honest and perhaps thought that he should tell it to his best friend, Yoshino. Now Hatori had stopped discussing such trivial things; this was proof he had grown up.

Well, it is strange that we are 28 years old and our relationship is still the same as when we were university students. It has to change..... It's a little sad though.

He looked at the side dishes left on top of the dinning room table and sighed. He tried to eat one of them but somehow it didn't feel as delicious as it had a while ago.

“I see... So there's someone he likes.....” Muttering to himself unconsciously, it strangely began to weigh heavily upon Yoshino's mind.

What kind of person did Hatori like?

Hatori had not told him anything, but was it someone that Yoshino knew? One by one, the questions popped into his head and he remembered the dejection in Hatori's voice.

“But he said he won't get anything out of it.....”

Did the person he like already have a lover?

It's not like him to steal someone else's love. Instead of thinking about his own happiness, Hatori thought about the happiness of his loved ones. That's the kind of man Hatori was; serious as far as being too serious, strict, and trustworthy. If Hatori didn't feel like talking about it, Yoshino had no choice but to deal with it, but he wanted to help. For some reason Yoshino didn't feel at peace in his heart.

「CHAPTER 2」

“Thank you for all your trouble.”

“No, if it weren't for this, I wouldn't ever get out. I'm sorry I called you for this. Please give my best regards to Hatori.” Yoshino gave small nod and handed the grateful Takano Masamune, editorial department's editor-in-chief, a brown envelope with the manuscript inside it. Really, he came to give it to Hatori, but Hatori was not here as he was in a business meeting with another author, so Takano, who knew Yoshino's true identity, immediately had come to the lobby to look for him. This time, the manuscript was a small comic scene, which was used as a supplement to the magazine, but that did not mean it was a quick job to do.

Hatori said it was okay to send him the manuscript through delivery, but Yoshino had wanted to go out before the deadline due date, so he decided to come to the publishing firm in person.

“Yoshikawa... No, Yoshino. Are you going shopping after this?” Takano asked him. He was so tall that Yoshino could not make eye contact if he did not look up at him. Every time he came here, Yoshino wondered why there were so many handsome men in the Emerald editorial department. Even Takano, with just his appearance alone, there was no doubt that no one would think that he was an editor-in-chief for a shoujo manga magazine.

“Yes. I'm running out of art supplies so I decided to stock up.”

“It's going to rain this evening, so you'd better go home before it starts. Did you bring an umbrella?”

“I brought a folding one just in case. It's getting pretty cloudy, so I need to quickly finish shopping and then go straight home.”

When he looked outside through the window of the lobby, the sky he thought was clear just a few minutes ago was starting to get dark. It seemed sullen, like Yoshino's mind. After he bowed for the second time and parted with Takano, he decided to hurry to the art supply store before it rained; so he started down the hill, that was in front of the company, at a brisk pace.

Suddenly, a cold droplet hit the top of his head. Perhaps he imagined it? When he looked up at the sky, raindrops began to fall one after the other and before he knew it, it truly started raining.

“Wah! It's not even evening yet!”

He quickly ducked under the nearest roof of a building and pulled out his folding umbrella. While he was opening up his umbrella, the rain intensified and began to fall harder.

“The weather forecast is such a liar! I planned to buy paper. How are you going to make it up to me now?!”

The weather forecast is based on probabilities after all. It is not a definite fact, so even if you complain you will still suffer inconveniences. However, he could not stand it if he did not blame something. Particularly today he wanted to buy paper designed for coloring. Even if they wrapped it up tightly for him at the art supplies store, it was impossible to protect it from the humidity of the rain.

“It'll be easier for me to change to digital art..... No, staying like this is better after all.”

He decided to head towards the station after the rain calmed down at least a little bit, and as he continued to hide from the rain he spotted Hatori next to a building.

“Huh? Tori?”

It is him. That suit. What's he doing in this rain.....? He's with Yuu, too?

Yoshino was about to call out to him, but noticed Yanase beside Hatori.

Why where they together?

Hatori and Yanase were so incompatible that even the other day in Yoshino's home they had talked with one another sarcastically. Since they talked like this to each other, he seemed to think that they would not want to meet up. But they were both adults already, so it was not strange even if at times they displayed an air of compromise.

Oh well, I'll call out to them.

Thinking that, the instant he was about to open his mouth to call out their names, he heard Hatori shout angrily. The sound of the rain mixed with their voices and he could not hear very well, but there was no doubt that he heard ‘Don't fuck with me!’

“Huh? They're fighting.....!?”

No matter how hard you try to look at it, it did not look like they were displaying an agreement to compromise. Yoshino slightly shifted his stance and Yanase came into full view.

The situation really was grim; it looked like they were arguing. Due to the situation these two were in, Yoshino began to hesitate in spite of himself. But if they were arguing he probably should stop them. Yoshino reconsidered it and solidified his decision to stop them. As he was about to walk over to them in the rain, Hatori grabbed and pulled Yanase towards himself.

Wh- What!?

Hatori's open umbrella tilted and concealed their faces from view. However, their pose was . . .

Yoshino froze as he stared in shock at the sight. They were close to each other for some time, but then broke off immediately as if nothing had happened; and after Yanase glared at Hatori, he ran off into the rain without even an umbrella. Yoshino hid behind a vending machine so that he would not be seen by Yanase and waited, his heart pounding, for Yanase to pass. Right after, Hatori also went back into the office.

Yoshino was flustered, as he was left behind standing alone in the rain.

Huh? What? What was that just now!?

They were hidden behind the umbrella so he couldn't see very well, but from where Yoshino was standing it had looked like they were kissing.

Two men together? I mean, it's Tori and Yui!? Why are they....!?

He wasn't sure why two men would be together, but he was far more shaken by the fact that it was Hatori and Yanase who had kissed.

“No, even though it's between two men, it's not good to have a prejudice against it.....I mean, the other day Hatori said he liked someone.....”

He remembered the words he had just heard Hatori mutter to himself the other day: ‘Beautiful.....perhaps more impudent,’ ; ‘I don't think I'll get anything out of it.’

He pondered over the words Hatori had been hesitant to say and then noticed something.

“.....Aah.....”



Yanase certainly was beautiful and his attitude towards Hatori can be called impudent. Hatori said he wouldn't get anything out of it. He probably meant it was because they were both men and perhaps his feelings disgusted Yanase. So all the questions led to one thing and Yoshino came up with an answer.

“Wow..... the person Tori likes is Yuu...”

I was a huge shock to Yoshino and he remained standing stupefied on one spot. His mind was so blank that even the sound of the pouring rain did not reach his ears. Eventually, he came to his senses as an orange light flashed before his eyes. When he noticed that it was the setting sun, it also stopped raining.

「CHAPTER 3」

He thought it was proper to receive an OK from Hatori for the storyboard corrections before he started drawing the comic scenes. Ever since he saw the dispute between Hatori and Yanase, Yoshino could not think straight for his head was full of thoughts. He did not have much spare time like always, so he had to hurry. But the only thing he thought about was what he had witnessed.

However, time did not wait for him. Before long he will be facing the deadline, so Yoshino set to work - drawing manga - and called his assistants to help finish the rough draft. Usually, while Yoshino did the inking, they drew things like the backgrounds, minor characters, and flowers. Naturally, Yanase also came; but somehow the event from the other day worried Yoshino and he could not make eye contact with him.

There's no way I can just tell him I saw that... and I can't just bluntly ask him about it either.....

It was their business. It had nothing to do with him. If he was so anxious to talk about it, he should probably start on a casual note, but at any rate there was no use in being so anxious.

Why am I so shocked?

Was it the fact that his childhood friend and his friend from middle school were gay? The fact that the person Hatori liked was Yuu? The fact that they kept it a secret from him? Or was he disappointed at knowing he was an outsider? Yoshino was in distress, as he did not fully understand his own feelings about it.

“ — ki . . .Chiaki!”

“Wha—? What?”

“Not 'what'! I said I finished the backgrounds so can you check it for me?”

“Ah, sorry. Um... It's fine.” He glanced at the manuscript held out before him and gave the OK. Even if he did not check it, Yanase was skilled with art, so it was impossible for Yoshino to complain. Yoshino trusted him, so it was fine even if Yanase never showed it to him; but since this was work, Yanase always asked him to check it.

“What should I do with it?”

“It'll be good if you do a daytime-like scene.”

“Jeez. Your instructions are so unclear as usual.”

“That's cause you're Yuu, so you draw exactly what I expect.”

“Can I take it that you trust me then?”

“Of course. How many years do you think we've known each other?”

While Yoshino gazed at Yanase returning to his desk, he was relieved he could talk to him like usual.

The person Tori likes.....

Yoshino felt a change in his heart as he realized this person, who was so close to him, would not tell him anything no matter how persistent he was in asking him. Then another assistant came up to him calling out nervously.

“Um.....Sir, I finished the toning.”

“Huh? Really? How surprising... I didn't get much done with the inking...”

He searched for another page he could give, but all of them were unfinished. On top of that, he had been so busy thinking that he had done only half the usual amount of work he always did.

“Hmm... Well then, I'm sorry but that's it for today. I'll finish the inking by tomorrow.”

“Okay. Don't slack. Please hurry up with it.”

He always made his regular assistants help him with his terrible progress until they had reached their breaking point, so he could not talk back to them.

“I'm sorry you had to come all the way here. Oh, you can go home too, Yuu,” Yoshino said, feeling ashamed, and showed the assistants out.

“See you tomorrow Sir.”

“Work hard!”

He watched the assistants leave as they said their goodbyes, and when he returned to the living room, for some reason, only Yanase had stayed behind. As he was thinking if there was something wrong, before he could ask Yanase, he was asked instead.

“Is something wrong?”

“Huh? What?”

“Did something happen with Hatori?”

“T-Tori? N-No! Not really.”

All of a sudden, Hatori's name popped up and Yoshino changed his tone of voice accidentally.

I'm definitely under suspicion now.....

He searched for the words that would somehow avoid the suspicion, but could not say anything at the moment. Yanase had his usual surly expression and sullenly questioned nervous Yoshino further.

“.....Did Hatori say anything about me?”

“Huh!? Wha- wha- what? About what?”

“..... No, nevermind.....” Yanase avoided the flustered Yoshino's question. Then he briefly said, “See ya tomorrow” and slipped out the front door like a stray cat.

“Wha... What?”

Yoshino sadly muttered to himself as he was left behind in confusion. Yanase's attitude indicated the two might have started dating each other. Otherwise Yanase would not have suddenly asked “Did he say anything about me?”. It was only natural that both of them could not tell Yoshino, their friend. Perhaps they were not sure which one of them should tell Yoshino that they were dating.

Oh... What's this feeling...?

He felt depression for the first time. Then, somehow a feeling of uncertainty welled up inside him. But maybe they did not mean to leave him in the dark and did care for him. Maybe since the three of them had been together for a long time they did not know how to tell him.

“But, somehow that's too distant..... Why won't they tell me?”

It was like they were a single existence — Hatori could tell anything to Yoshino. That is why this time Yoshino thought Hatori would open his heart to him again. However, that was probably just Yoshino being conceited. Perhaps he was full of himself and narrow-minded. In the past, Hatori had told him everything: about his family, his career paths, and his relationships. Hatori was overly serious and stubborn, but he was the one who decided Yoshino should debut as a manga artist. At that time, Yoshino was not sure whether to drop out of university and become a full time manga artist but Hatori told him, ‘If you ever end up on the streets, I'll take care of you’ and pushed him to pursue his

dreams. Of course, Yoshino knew Hatori was only exaggerating in order to encourage him, but when he found out Hatori, who always thought indifferently about Yoshino's talk of following his dreams, was willing to help him, he was touched.

“AUGH! Stop! Stop! I have work to do right now! The manuscript!!”

He sat down at his desk, thinking he would get rid of the strange thoughts and wildly began drawing. Nevertheless, thoughts about Hatori would not leave his head, but nonetheless he progressed with the inking unusually fast. The whole day he had been falling behind and now he immediately regained energy.

“Shit! Why does only that guy's face pop into my head.....?”

That serious expression that never changed; for some reason Hatori's stony face would not disappear from Yoshino's mind. Thinking to shake off his confusion and embarrassment, Yoshino violently shook his head from left to right when all of a sudden the telephone rang.

“Wah! Yes, hello?”

While thinking who in the world is this person to call at such a bad time, he braced himself, picked up the phone, and felt like taking out his anger by responding in a rude tone.

“It's me. How is everything?”

“T- Tori!?”

Exactly then, it seemed like his heart jumped out from his mouth since the call was from exactly the person who was causing him to be troubled. Yoshino regretted that he did not answer the phone after checking the name displayed on the telephone display screen.

“S- so far everything is going well, I think. Rather, I feel on top of things?”

...Seriously, I'm such an idiot! It's not going well at all!!

He was trying to pretend to be calm so that his trembling would not be noticed; but because he was worrying, he told completely the wrong information. Yoshino fully realized it was not good to pretend to be okay and he sighed deeply within himself at how stupid he was.

“.....All right. I guess for now I will proceed with the usual intended printing deadline.”

“What the hell? Didn't I say everything is going well!?”

Annoyed with the words that were beginning to criticize him, Yoshino was on the verge of flaring up at Hatori. He lied and it was contradictory of him, but he was offended Hatori did not have confidence in him when he informed him that everything was okay. Even though his bragging was seen through, Yoshino stuck to it like a child and could not stop himself from continuing to speak in that way.

“I-I said I'm okay, so I'm okay!”

“Don't get cocky!!”

“.....!” Being yelled at unconsciously brought Yoshino to be at a loss for words.

“The pace of your work is inconsistent. Even if you are doing good at first, after that you will be stuck, won't you?.”

“...Yes.”

He finally succumbed to the words that continued to fire at him, and helplessly nodded his head in agreement. Hatori's words were reasonable. There were no cases showing cockiness bringing about good results. While bearing that in mind, Yoshino would improve the progress of the manuscript from now on and fix his pretentious behavior that was inside his head; then all of a sudden he realized.

I'm talking to Tori normally right now, aren't I?

While he was talking, he began to calm down and now it seemed like he could have a natural conversation. Yoshino realized this and for the moment was relieved. Even if Hatori was keeping a secret, Yoshino did not want to have strained relations with him.

“Well then, do your best.”

“Yes. Leave it to me.”

He felt the fog in his head clear away a little and this time he said it from the bottom of his heart as he was filled with pride to draw the best manga. He should flow along with his pace; not have his mood of a moment lead him astray from his work. Yoshino warned himself of that and was about to hang up the phone but the silence at the other end of the line somehow worried him. Whenever he said, ‘Leave it to me,’ the phrase ‘Don't flatter yourself’ were certainly supposed to be the harsh words returned to him.

“Tori?”

“ “

What is it...?

He did not know why, but he had a feeling that Hatori was hesitating to say something.

“What's wrong? Are you worried about something?”

The OK for the storyboard was in effect. But, there were things to be fixed in order to adjust the dialogue in progress, so Yoshino thought this time he would have a conversation like that again. However, the words, which came out of Hatori's mouth, seemed to dig up Yoshino's worries.

“ . . . Yanase said you were acting strange.”

“Yuu...?”

“Yeah. I was told that a while ago when I got in touch with him. Did something happen?”

“Uh...” He was shocked. If Hatori says a while ago, then it meant Yanase told him right after he left Yoshino's home. Yanase's behavior was also peculiar, but his own attitude, trembling at all sorts of things, was probably without doubt strange. However, more important than that was how shocked he was at the fact that the first thing Yanase did was contact Hatori and to tell him that.

“I'm - I'm completely calm. I'm not acting strange!” Yoshino desperately pretended that it was nothing.

He absolutely could not talk about those things he saw happen with Hatori and Yanase. Until he was told by Hatori and Yanase themselves about what was going on with them, however much he was questioned, he made up his mind to be silent on this matter.

“I see.....” And yet, even if Yoshino's attitude was like that, all Hatori did was mutter this. If Yoshino's behavior was even a little bit strange, the usual Hatori would persistently ask the reason for it and would try to get rid of the source of the problem. Nevertheless, Yoshino thought that something was odd.

“.....Yanase didn't say anything?”

“Huh...?”

His heart gave a huge leap and for an instant darkness shrouded his eyes.

If I remember correctly, didn't Yanase also ask me something similar?: '.....Did Hatori say anything about me?'

Yoshino's heart began to beat irregularly at these noticeable signs piling up on top of each other. *Badump, badump*, were the sounds which resonated inside him and from the other end of the line he faintly heard Hatori calling out to him.

“Yoshino?”

“Huh? N- No, what? I... think he didn't say much... Did something happen?”

“.....No, it's fine if it's nothing.”

It was just like he thought; Hatori's words were also ambiguous. Ever since they were born, Hatori had shared many of the same moments with Yoshino, even more than he had with his parents, and now it seemed like this was the first time they were in this awkward atmosphere.

What is it? What the hell is it? If you want to say something, then you should just hurry up and say it!

It seemed he completely did not know this Hatori. Yoshino was seized by meaningless annoyance and began to lose his temper. But he held it back and chewed on his lip.

“Sorry, it looks like the bath is ready, so I have to go now.”

Because the water in the tub could not be reheated, taking a bath immediately is a must; so this was a reasonable excuse, which he made up, and hanged up the phone. Hatori seemed to want to say something, but did not take it upon himself to stop Yoshino.

“Hah.....” Yoshino put the phone back into the receiver and gave out a great sigh.
.....I knew it, I think they started dating.....

Surely, the current Hatori did not seem to be the usual Hatori. Having realized this fact, Yoshino was forced to fall deeper into depression.

Seriously, what is this? This feeling.....

It was murky within his chest and clearly it was only somewhat of a blue feeling, but to Yoshino, it was not clear as to why he was depressed. Besides, he was also irritated and felt sick. Nevertheless, for some reason he felt like he already experienced this emotion. Yoshino desperately thought back to his previous memories. Then at last, he uncovered a single thing from the corner of his mind.

“Perhaps that time...?”

It was probably the time Hatori met one of his new girlfriends. As usual, before Hatori informed Yoshino that he was going out with someone, Yoshino heard it from a friend. After that, Hatori informed him, but the fact that he could not be told first to know about it, for some reason frustrated Yoshino and he could not just quietly accept it.

“Oh.....I'm disappointed.....”

Finally, the name, of the emotion, which resembled his feeling, occurred to him and Yoshino unintentionally accepted it. This feeling of his was depression and it was probably only because he was being excluded - left not knowing about what was going on with those two. Only he alone was forced not to know anything and before he knew it, it felt like they left him behind; it was painful.

“Dammit!” Yoshino fell down on the living room sofa; he was gloomy and tired. Until a while ago, he wanted to speed up with the manuscript but if he was going to sleep, he should have slept properly on a bed so as to regain physical strength and work efficiently later on. However, right now, Yoshino did not feel like working on the manuscript and did not have any energy to go over to his bed.

Just a little bit more like this. Then, I'll make hot coffee and work on the manuscript.....

He continued to make up a schedule in his head, but his exhausted body did not move. And then before he knew it, Yoshino fell into a deep sleep.

* * * *

.....Huh.....? Did I fall asleep.....?

Suddenly, he woke up; but it was strangely dark before his eyes. Just as he began to think the lights should have been turned on, simultaneously he felt something pressing down on his lips. Yoshino opened his eyes, wondering what that soft thing was and then his eyes widened.

..... It's Tori.....?

He was too close to him and out of focus, but without a doubt it was Hatori who was kissing him. Yoshino thought Hatori must have entered with a duplicate key, but

why was he kissing him? Yoshino stared at him without blinking, and then Hatori also noticed that Yoshino's eyes were open.

“.....What are you doing...?”

He was too shocked, but contrary to his expectations, his questioning voice came out calm. For a moment, Hatori looked like he panicked at Yoshino's words, but then immediately averted his gaze in a self-conscious manner and was silent.

“.....”

“.....”

It was so silent that you could think it would continue on forever. However, it was absurd to stay silent with each other.

Yoshino decided to sit up from the sofa and said, “Hey... By the way, I want to ask. Are you gay?”

“.....”

Say something!!

Although he was trying to break off this awkward atmosphere, Yoshino was getting irritated, thinking that he was an idiot, just talking to himself. However, he reconsidered that thought and instead thought that, preferably with this opportunity, Hatori should be the one to start talking about what was going on with him and Yanase. Yoshino was trying not to get angry and continued speaking.

“Nevermind. That doesn't bother me, so it's okay, but... No... it's okay, but I was a bit... Wah!”

However, the moment Yoshino was about to say ‘surprised’, Hatori pushed him down on the sofa.

“T- Tori!?”

Hatori ignored Yoshino's flustered raised voice and quickly pulled off the shirt over Yoshino's head. He then binded Yoshino's arms.

“.....Huh?”

Yoshino foolishly raised his voice without understanding right away what was being done to him. The instant Hatori's lips touched his bare chest, his body became hot and he realized what was happening.

“Tori! What are you thinking!?”

He was powerfully held down by Hatori and completely missed the chance to escape. He desperately struggled, but could not fight decently with his arms bound, and since he was being crushed down by Hatori's body, he also could not move his legs.

A large, cold hand began to feel all over his body. He expected to recognize this hand, but right now he completely did not know to whom it belonged.

“NO—! Stop—!”

The moment Yoshino had his lips closed, his mouth was forced open and a tongue roughly pushed itself in, searching within. Yoshino's worn out tongue turned numb, and the hair on his skin stood on end. His numb tongue was tightly being sucked on and the more it was sucked on, the more it hurt. This was the first time Yoshino had such a rough kiss and he did not know what to do.

“Haah! Aah... AH!?”

Finally, the moment their lips parted, a hand glided over his chest and touched his nipple. Then, still not uttering a single word, Hatori crushed the hardened nipple and started twisting it.

“S-stop—! I said stop!!”

Are you kidding? You've got to be kidding me...

He could not believe his body trembled at the feeling of the tongue crawling over his skin and or that his lower regions were hot as his nipples were being toyed with. Even though he was being treated as a subject of desire and even though being raped was humiliating, his body was responding rather than resisting. Yoshino was experiencing these feelings although saying he disliked it, and this seemed terribly disgraceful to him. It felt just like he was being changed into something he did not recognize.

“No—! Tori—Hatori!!”

He did not understand what Hatori was thinking. Only that it definitely was Hatori, violating his body while wearing a terrible expression he had never seen before.

“.....Ahh.....!”

The uppermost center of his jeans, as it was being touched against his will, was beginning to feel hot. Hatori's knee forcefully pushed down on it and Yoshino let out a shriek. Hatori violently ripped off Yoshino's belt and lowered Yoshino's jeans, along with the underwear.

“Sto— What are you— AAH!”

His exposed manhood was grabbed and rubbed roughly. He still could not fight back properly and Hatori's fondling kept him frozen. At the same time, the pain and pleasure forcefully afforded to him hurt Yoshino's pride. He completely did not know what was being done to him or what was going to be done to him.

But even Yoshino, with his instinct, could sense that Hatori was seriously only trying to make love to him.

“Wha—”

Hatori completely removed the underwear and jeans wrapped around Yoshino's limp legs and rose one of Yoshino's legs up high. Then, he hid his licked finger between Yoshino's legs.

“Owww.....!”

The wet finger was thrust into a place not meant for foreign objects. The small opening resisted the painful intrusion. But Hatori still began to violently churn it up inside him.

“OWW.....! Stop! Tori.....Sto-Sto—!”

Hatori's facial expression was distorted at Yoshino's repeated broken words, which were asking for him to stop as though pleading him, but Hatori was not about to end it, nevertheless.

“N-... No! I'm begging you...so—”

After Hatori rummaged within his body for some time, he finally withdrew his finger. However, the minute Yoshino felt relieved the pain was gone, something hot was being pushed against there. Without any time to realize what it was, his hips were grabbed and pulled forward; the hot object penetrated inside him. Yoshino let out a silent scream from the shock.

“.....!!”

Because of too much pain, for a moment everything was dyed to crimson before his eyes. As he repeated to breathe heavily from the pain, he knew this fact: it was Hatori's desire that was forcing itself inside him.

“...Why...such.....”



He did not have any will power to fight anymore. As Yoshino abandoned his tired body on the sofa, Hatori tried to hold him. Although Hatori forcefully violated him, his heart ached that Hatori was holding him like a treasure. His eyes turned hot and the moment he blinked, a single tear spilled out.

“.....I'm sorry,” Hatori finally breathed out a small apology.

“...Tori, aah... haa—!!”

Yoshino had no time to respond to him, since the next moment their intertwined bodies began to shake violently. His rubbed insides were hot and his voice came out of control from the strong pressure and vibration coming inside him.

“Ow... Ah...ah! Ah...!”

It was painful, but that was not all; he felt another feeling intermixed with it. As the desire roughly bore repeatedly into his body, Yoshino gradually lost all sense of reality.

“...Ah...Oh—Aaah...!”

Yoshino sobbed from this violent act. Both his head and his body were a mess. Just like the violent creaking of the sofa, his body was also probably going to break. Within Yoshino's still clouded head, this is what he thought of:

If I were destroyed into pieces, I wouldn't have to feel anything.....

As he was losing consciousness he saw Hatori's face. For some reason his face was more wretched than Yoshino's. Even though he was the one inflicting pain upon Yoshino, Yoshino wondered why he was making such a face.

.....Don't make such a face, like you're about to cry.....

Although a very terrible thing was happening to him, Yoshino wanted Hatori to comfort him in any way, since this was a habit of his.

“Haa, ah...aah.....!”

However, it was only natural that he was at his limit. He definitely could no longer maintain his consciousness. As he felt his thoughts diminishing, his eyelids lowered. Then, Hatori's tiny whisper reached his ears just as his consciousness came to an end.

“... I ... have always loved you.”

.....Why are you saying that.....? I seriously don't understand.....

Why did he do such a thing to him? Why did he say such a thing to him? And Yoshino also did not understand his own heart.

“... I . . .”

The words he wanted to say were swallowed up within his fading consciousness. And faintly hearing his own continuous breathing was Yoshino's last memory of that day.

「CHAPTER 4」

“Ugh...I'm dizzy.....” Yoshino groaned in his bed with a high fever. After he sent the manuscript for printing, the combination of his fatigued body and overworked brain had knocked him out. Even in this situation he somehow managed to send the manuscript, so of course he wanted to be praised for being a pro, but to be called that would be a joke. In reality, he was in a situation where he had to apologize to various people. Ever since he debuted, this was the worst situation he ever had at work.

“Haa—h...”

Because Hatori had done such a thing to him, he could not even think about the manuscript; however no matter how unpleasant things were, work was work. As a pro, he thought having private matters interfere with work was absolutely the worst, even if it bothered him.

But, dream and reality don't mix together so easily.....

Even though he realized this, he was not doing anything about it and could not even think of what to do about it. He ought to be trying to not think of it, but nevertheless, the only thoughts that crossed his mind were about Hatori. This was the first time such a thing happened to him.

Since he was thinking about so many things all at the same time, he realized he might be confused, so he tried to stop thinking, but even if he thought as much as he could, Yoshino did not understand what Hatori was thinking.

I mean, no matter how much I think about it, I don't understand.

Finally, he decided to leave his worrying for later, and switched his thoughts in order to force himself to concentrate on the manuscript. As usual he sent the manuscript at the last moment, but if he was to avoid getting his manuscript dropped from the magazine, Yoshino had to do his best. He thought it would not be strange to call the fact that he was able to catch-up a miracle. Of course he finished without getting dropped — thanks to all of his assistants who worked hard for him and thanks to Hatori who ran around to all sorts of places as he negotiated the deadline for him. But during the time he

was finishing up the manuscript, he talked of nothing but work with Hatori, and when they met, they also did not make eye contact with each other.

.....It's much easier like that for me, but...

With this and that, Yoshino was somehow able to finish the manuscript, however as soon as he was done, the tension left him and he caught a fever and fell apart.

“I have to apologize to everyone later...”

He caused all sorts of trouble to so many people and it seemed like up till now this never happened before. It was unbelievable as to how much he really was indebted to his admired assistants. For now, Yoshino thought he probably should eat something after he feels better and announces himself active again.

He can come later.....

He avoided Hatori all through the time he was finishing up the manuscript, but continuing to run away any more would be impossible. If Hatori was an ordinary friend and such a thing happened, he could just ignore him without contacting him ever again after it had happened. But Hatori was his childhood friend and his work partner, a work partner who could not stop being the editor in charge of him. This was the obvious reality, but this situation of not being able to even run away was horrible for Yoshino.

“Why did this happen.....?” He tossed around in his bed while muttering to himself again. No matter how many times he thought about it, he could not come up with an answer. However, even if he knew there was no answer, he could not help thinking about it, nevertheless.

Maybe it didn't go well between Tori and Yuu?

No matter how he tried to look at it, it looked as if the two were fighting before they kissed on that rainy day. So that meant Hatori gave up on Yanase? Then Yoshino misunderstood what he had heard from Yanase. He could not hold back his irritation, as he thought Hatori must have taken out his desire on him as he happened to be close by.

Then, I'm Yuu's replacement...?

That passion, those arms roughly holding him, and the passionate kissing, all of that was taken out on him because he was Yuu's replacement?

I mean, a replacement!! That's all I was to Tori!?

Thinking that made him a little sick, and he felt like crying from the mortification and miserableness. Obviously he was angry at being attacked. If another guy did such a thing to him, he would definitely have gone to the police. However, his partner was Tori, so Yoshino wanted to know the reason directly from him, as to why he did such a thing. Besides, even though Yoshino thought first getting to understand Hatori was the best, he was angry with himself that he did not understand what Hatori was thinking before.

Why didn't he talk it over with me? Before doing that... Or, is he not even able to see me as someone he can seek advice from?

He felt a pain in his chest. Yoshino felt like his own existence did not matter, and it crushed him. Moreover...

“What does Yuu not like about Tori?”

He thought Hatori was a really great guy. He did not understand what part of Hatori did not meet Yuu's expectations, but he was sure if they dated they could definitely be happy. Although it was a relationship between men, Yoshino thought rejecting a man like Hatori was a waste. If Yanase was hesitating, as long as he consulted with Yoshino, Yoshino would encourage him, but.....

Even though Yoshino believed that from the bottom of his heart, pent up feelings somehow remained in his heart.

“Shit...!”

This was probably due to the feelings of being embraced that still remained in his body.

I didn't know he had such a side to him...

It was the first time Yoshino had seen Hatori show so much emotion. Surely, Hatori's feelings for Yanase were just as strong as the power of his embracing arms. But Yoshino did not know Hatori even had such passion in him.

“If I was the guy Tori liked, I wouldn't mind.....”

As Yoshino was immersed in such deep emotions, he became flustered by his own remark.

“Huh!? What am I saying!?”

No, no. That only happens in shoujo manga. I don't have any interest in that!

When he desperately was making an excuse for himself, he felt his fever rising again.

“.....If only all of this was a dream.....”

Everything up till now was a bad dream. When he wakes up, he will be in front of Hatori in the usual cafe and still worrying over the storyboard. He had enough of such painful hectic times before the deadline, but even they were much better than having this awkward relationship with Hatori. As Yoshino rolled around in his bed from these thoughts, he heard an incoming e-mail on his cellphone that was lying on the nightstand.

“An email? Is it Yuu?”

When Yoshino collapsed from the illness, Yanase had stayed beside him and was also the one to call the ambulance. Yoshino returned home, insisting he did not need to be hospitalized, but Yanase was worried about him and often sent him e-mails.

“Ah.....”

However, it was from Hatori with the subject of the e-mail:

“Thanks for your hard work.”

“How are you feeling? If you're in too much pain, I will call a doctor I know and ask for him to come by your home. You seriously worked hard and saved us this time. And the fireworks display I said I wanted to use the material from on our next project is this weekend, so if you become well by then do you want to go? If you can go, I also want to talk properly about the event that happened a few days ago.

- Hatori”

When Yoshino finished reading, he smiled bitterly at the sincerity of the email that seemed just like Hatori.

“.....That's just like him.....”

Yoshino was no match against it, and was once again struck with admiration. Hatori had the option to pretend like nothing happened between them that time, but it seemed like Hatori did not intend to run away from it. Yoshino had to think how he could run away, but the only thing he thought about was how much he wished it was all a dream.

“He really likes Yuu.....”

Of course the serious Hatori definitely liked Yanase a lot, and he must have done such a thing to Yoshino because he was too emotional from being rejected. As time passed, Yoshino collected his thoughts and was able to think now that he was slightly calmer.

I'm angry, but I can't hate him.....

While feeling a strange sadness, Yoshino decided to go to the scheduled fireworks display.

“I don't want to stay apart from him...”

Because of that, Yoshino wanted to have a proper talk with Hatori and hear out his reasons. Yoshino wanted, from the bottom of his heart, for this to be settled.

「CHAPTER 5」

Yoshino recovered smoothly. It was not only because he was originally healthy, but also his positive frame of mind might have brought him luck. As Yoshino continued to devour the food Yanase brought him, his low body weight, which was due to the stress before the deadline and the fever, was brought back to normal.

And today was the fireworks display.....

Their meeting place was located in front of a small shrine; in a direction away from the festival grounds. When he went at twilight, Hatori was already there. Maybe because today was a day off from work, Hatori was dressed casually, and for some reason Yoshino's heart gave a thump when he saw him.

Wha- what? My heart 'thumped' just now...

Yoshino forced himself to conclude that this was because he was just surprised at the unfamiliar clothes and called out to Hatori.

“Hey!”

He decided to act like his usual self, but his voice obviously sounded shrill.

Wah...My voice sounded messed up just now.....

Yoshino thought Hatori would point out how strange his attitude was, but he saw Hatori's behavior was oddly awkward as well. Surely Hatori was also tense, just like Yoshino.

“.....Let's go. I know a good spot where we can see the fireworks better.”

Yoshino hurriedly chased after Hatori who began walking ahead of him at a brisk pace. While Yoshino was thinking it was probably unnatural to not say anything, words would not leave his mouth either. They walked in the direction opposite from the festival in silence and after going through a narrow road they arrived at a deserted riverbank.

“The good spot is here?”

“I heard about it from a neighbor. Local people rarely come here. Besides, it seems you can see the fireworks better here.”

“Hmm.”

With that, their conversation ended again. The sounds of the people from the fireworks grounds did not reach this secluded place. The only sounds that could be heard were the buzzing of the insects and the murmur of the river.

We'll have something to talk about again when the fireworks go up.

Yoshino accepted this and was about to sit down on the riverbank, when Hatori suddenly spoke.

“.....You'll have a different editor.”

“Huh!? Why!?”

He was starting to sit down, but this surprised him and he froze on the spot. As Yoshino gazed in astonishment, Hatori continued speaking indifferently.

“This time, it was my fault the manuscript was late. I lost your.....the author's trust, so I did what was natural. No one can be your replacement, but if it's my replacement, there are many. Fortunately, all the best editors are gathered in my department.”

Hatori plainly informed him, without giving Yoshino a chance to interrupt him.

“I have the editor-in-chief's consent. If you want to request an editor.....”

“Hold on! Wait a minute! What is this all of a sudden!?”

Unable to follow up with this sudden turn of events, Yoshino hastily interrupted Hatori. Didn't he call him today in order to settle the matter that happened a few days ago? This was resolved unilaterally, but he did not agree with it.

“I already made up my mind.”

“What do you mean made up your mind!? Calm down, Tori! No, maybe I'm the one who should calm down first?”

While Yoshino was in a state of confusion, Hatori further added a few final words.

“I love you.”

.....*Ha?*

Yoshino's mind turned blank at the monotone words that sounded as if saying the menu of tonight's dinner.

“I think you already know, but I wanted to tell you properly myself.”

Hatori spoke like it was a thing of the past, causing Yoshino to blink.

I love you? You already know? What in the world is he talking about...?

Yoshino became confused as he was not following along with the subject of the conversation that was quickly progressing all on its own. Immediately, he thought he might be able to understand if he heard it one more time, so he asked Hatori to say it again.

“.....Sorry. Can you say that again.....? What you said just now.....”

“I love you. Ever since I can remember, I've always loved you.”

Hatori stared straight at him with a plain look and clearly told him each word with a solemn expression. With that, Yoshino finally was able to understand what Hatori was saying, but now he was struck with a different bewilderment.

“??? Wait a minute. But don't you love Yuu...?”

Tori loves Yuu, and Yuu loves Tori, right? Yuu just couldn't admit it and turned him down, so Tori believed the only way to not hurt his own pride would be to use me...as a substitute?

Hatori's words completely did not coincide with the story Yoshino expected. Hatori made an extremely ill face at Yoshino's question.

“.....Why do I have to be in love with him, out of all people?”

“What do you mean? Huh? What? Am I wrong about Yuu.....?”

“Yeah. How the hell did you make such a disgusting mistake about us?” Hatori said, while frowning with disgust. No matter how much he looked at Hatori's appearance, it was not an attitude of a person in love.

“Then.....you really like me...? Right???”

“I thought you were acting strange because you heard about my feelings from Yanase.”

“No- not at all...!”

While Yoshino shook his head in denial, he remembered Hatori's ambiguous phone call a short while ago. Thinking that since he had not heard anything about Hatori's feelings from Yanase, Yoshino denied Hatori's sudden question; but he remembered that at that time he trembled at the fact that Hatori's question was the same as Yanase's. Without realizing it, he had stiffened his attitude back then. Surely, Hatori must have misunderstood him because of that.

So that's why he came to my house.....

Finally, Yoshino realized he was the one who made a huge mistake. After Hatori looked at Yoshino's blank look with a complicated expression, he suddenly cast his gaze towards the river.

"I took this job because I wanted to stay by your side. When I became your editor, I was happy. But I knew you were straight, so I hid these feelings for a long time."

"Wha- what...? That's..."

Yoshino was overcome with surprise at the importance of the fact he was just informed with and weakly sat down on the spot. Hatori hid such feelings from him for such a long time and chose even his job on behalf of him.....

"I didn't notice it at all....."

"I made it so that you wouldn't notice," said Hatori looking indifferent, but how heart breaking the hiding had probably been for him. Surely, he had been terribly concerned with it, and must have suffered.

And yet, I depended on Tori's kindness for over 20 years without being aware...?

The moment he thought that, Yoshino was filled with apologetic feelings towards Hatori. With this sort of attitude, he might be too dense for a popular author drawing love comics.

"Ah...eh...then what? You mean you made me into your fantasy?"

Yoshino asked an unnecessary question, thinking to fix the heavy atmosphere. But, as he was slightly laughing, having made a joke to break the ice, Hatori's reply was in all respects serious, contrary to Yoshino's expectations.

"Always."

"....."

Suddenly, Yoshino's face gradually turned hot and he noticed that his heart was starting to beat violently. The setting sun had already set, and the rest of the sky was darker than the horizon, that was dyed a light purple.

"Wha- what are you doing? Without a person's permission....."

Yoshino complained so that his increasing heartbeat would not be noticed while hoping that his burning cheeks were hidden from Hatori in this darkness.

Then, Hatori laughed with a touch of self-ridicule.

“Is it disgusting? The guy you looked at as only a friend for 28 years has these feelings for you.”

“I'm not particularly disgusted.....”

.....Huh? Yeah. I don't think I'm disgusted.....

Even though he was kissed, even though he was forcefully made love to, he did not feel disgust at all. Yoshino tilted his head to one side, as he noticed this for the first time.

“You know, I really.....”

“You don't need to worry. Just disregard my feelings. I apologize for taking advantage of you a few days ago. It was completely inexcusable and I'm really sorry,” Hatori said, bowing deeply. Ever since Hatori had grown taller than him, Yoshino did not think the day would come when he would set his eyes like this on the top of Hatori's head, which he seldom ever saw. “I don't know what I'll do if I'm near you. I might hurt you again.....So, I think it's best that I'm apart from you.”

Hatori settled the matter by himself, walked a few steps away from Yoshino and laid down on the slope of the river bank. Annoyed at Hatori, who was trying to maintain a distance from him, Yoshino deliberately planted himself right next to him.

“You're quite selfish.”

“.....Sorry. I'm not going to lose control of myself anymore,” Hatori replied bitterly to the words criticizing him and turned his face away from Yoshino. And almost that same instant, the sky fully lit up. As soon as Yoshino realized it, he heard a low, base-like sound vibrating in his stomach. The time for the fireworks display was starting.

“It's beautiful.”

“Yeah.”

It had been a long time since he last watched the fireworks with Hatori. As they were watching the splendid fireworks, Yoshino muttered, “.....I like you Tori.”

“As a childhood friend.”

Hatori instantly replied to him, and Yoshino was at a loss for words.

“You don't have to force yourself. I get it.”

A slight laugh could be heard in Hatori's voice. The same, usual light laughter now seemed pained to Yoshino.



“It's not like that. Seriously- I think I like you, or maybe it's more like there's no part of me that dislikes you.....I am so close to you, but I don't get it, you know.”

He did not know whether this was love or just friendship. Whether he wanted to be friends with Hatori, or if he wanted to take it to the next level.....

Yoshino was overwhelmed, as he thought about it in desperation, but the answer was nowhere to be found. This was the first time Yoshino did not understand his own feelings.

I'm basically simple-minded.....

White was white, black was black. There was nothing in between white and black. That was why he also had not thought of having any other relationship with Hatori besides being friends. No, he had not had the opportunity to think while being so close with him.

“Yeah, we are close. We're close but we're not family. We're far too close.” Hatori muttered as if warning him, and these words startled Yoshino.

Oh, he was thinking the same thing too..... And yet, I couldn't sense his feelings for over 20 years...

“.....Sorry. If now, I say something like, 'I actually loved you too!!' it will end up being a happy ending.”

When Yoshino said that, Hatori laughed a little. The fireworks were set off with a crack in such a way that they drowned out the laugh.

“Stu-pid. Don't think things will happen like in those kinds of manga.”

“.....”

Hatori turned his face towards Yoshino and Yoshino thought he really looked happy.

Seriously, what should I do.....? At this rate, he's definitely going to leave me.

He did not hate Hatori. Rather, he loved him. But, like he had it pointed out to him a while ago, it was a 'love' for a 'childhood friend' and for a 'companion'; he did not know if it was as a 'romantic love'. The only thing he was able to state clearly was that he definitely did not want Hatori to leave him.

“Recently, I was told by Yuu that I rely on you.”

“By Yanase?”

“I think that Yuu is definitely right. I depend on you with my job and even my private life. I understand I shouldn't do that, but I don't want you to leave me.”

After he spoke evasively, he continued in a soft voice, “.....I just want you all to myself.”

Then Hatori began to reason with him in a tone of voice that had realized everything.

“You don't really need me. My existence is not necessary for you. Right now I happen to be in front of you, so you just think that.”

“.....”

Could someone else really become Hatori's replacement? Would he be all right if Hatori was not here?

“Don't worry. There are only skilled editors in our company, so you can rest assured about that matter.”

Then he jokingly added that Yoshino had no choice but to deal with his personal life on his own, but Yoshino could not agree to that.

“.....If you stop being my editor, do you plan not being around me anymore?”

“.....”

“Do you plan not talking to me anymore!?”

Hatori sat up with out replying anything and turned his back to Yoshino so as to not to show his facial expression.

“It's better for us like that. Sorry, but I'm going to go now.....”

“Wait!”

As Hatori stood up and was about to leave, Yoshino unintentionally grabbed his hand. Rather than thinking of a solution in his head, Yoshino's hand had moved ahead of him. Hatori turned his face towards Yoshino and forced a smile as he tried to brush of Yoshino's hand.

“Let go. It hurts.”

“No.”

At this rate, Tori is going to leave me. I don't want that. I definitely don't want that!

He did not know the reason, but he was certain that this was his only feeling.

“Try to do it one more time.”

“Do what?”

“Kiss me. If I'm disgusted for real, I'll definitely say it.”

Yoshino was in a state of crisis so this was the only plan he could think of. If he could not work it out in his head, he had no choice but to try to use his body. Yoshino decided that for the sake of not losing Hatori, he had nothing left to do but to make his feelings clear.

“Cut it out. You're gonna regret it.”

Hatori was trying to shake him off more strongly than before, but Yoshino desperately held on to his hand.

“I decided for myself whether to do this or not. Because of you, I'm now confused. If I don't settle these feelings, I won't be able to think of anything else!”

“.....”

Hatori looked surprised at Yoshino's persistence, and then fell silent.

Tori, you idiot! Say something...!

Yoshino was patiently putting up with the silence along with his restless feelings. Then after some time, Hatori suddenly lost the strength in his body.

“.....All right,” Hatori said only that and gently stroked Yoshino's cheek with his free hand. The instant Yoshino felt the loving stroke of Hatori's fingers, his lips were locked with Hatori's.

“Mmh...!”

.....I can hear the sound of the fireworks.

Hatori's lips were a little cold from his low body temperature, but it was strangely pleasant. It was just like Yoshino had thought; he did not feel any feelings of disgust. It seemed even as if the kiss was completely natural.

“.....Ah.....”

This quietly marked the end of an ever long kiss.

“Yoshino?”

“...Wha- what...?”

The moment his name was called and he came to his senses, he was suddenly seized with shyness.

Wha- what kind of face should I make...?

He was not disgusted, but if he could not make a calm face, then he also did not know what he could say. When he cast a glance at Hatori, he was gazing at him with a gentle, calm expression that Yoshino had never seen up till now.

“.....!!”

Yoshino's heart violently beat more and more at that expression.

Be a little embarrassed too!!

Then Hatori stood up on the spot, turned to Yoshino, whose eyes were swimming in embarrassment, and held his hand out to him.

“Let's go home.”

“.....Okay.”

Hatori smiled kindly at him, and Yoshino, still blushing, gave a small nod. Then he grabbed Hatori's stretched out hand.

* * * *

“Wah~! We're soaked all the way down to our pants! Should we...take a bath before changing clothes?”

Standing at his front door, Yoshino gave out a frustrated sigh as he looked at the water droplets dripping down to his feet. He had been glad Hatori invited him to go home, but within a few minutes of walking, sudden heavy rain, like a shower, had begun to fall. In this state, the fireworks display must have stopped as well.

“What are you doing, Tori? Hurry up and get inside!”

In the downpour of the rain, Yoshino had run without even an umbrella and to prevent Hatori from trying to go home, he brought him to his own home. He knew there was nothing to talk about, but for some reason he could not part from him. Yoshino had half threatened him that Hatori will be mistaken for a suspicious figure, since he was dripping wet, and somehow brought him to his home, near the riverbank; but Hatori was not about to step inside, beyond the entrance, so easily.

“I'll be fine if you lend me a towel and an umbrella.”

“Idiot, what are you going to do if you catch a cold? I don't want to get the whole house wet, so come this way.”

He forcefully took Hatori with him to the washroom and after he instructed him to remove his clothes, he pushed the switch to fill up the bath with hot water.

“Now we wait for the bath to heat up.”

“Aah.”

Hatori gave up on disobeying Yoshino and quietly began to remove his wet shirt. Then Yoshino also completely took off his soaked-through t-shirt and threw it into the washing machine.

“You should wash yours too, so put it in here. Oh, here's a bath towel.”

“Mm.”

Hatori took the towel from Yoshino and roughly began to wipe his dripping wet hair. Yoshino also briefly wiped his chest and head, and then touched his drenched to the skin jeans. But the instant he somehow was about to undo his wet and stiff belt, his eyes suddenly met with Hatori's.

.....*Oh.*

Yoshino realized, though it was quite late now, that they were facing each other with their bare chests exposed, and he trembled, in spite of himself.

Wh-, wh-, wh-, what am I so nervous about!? Didn't I get used to seeing Tori naked from when we were little!?

They had taken countless baths and such together. However, it had been a while since he had seen Hatori's body and it seemed different than how he remembered it to be.

Somehow, he looks like an adult man..... Compared to him, I'm just so thin.

“...Uh...”

‘Where did his lust come from?’ was the question that unintentionally floated into Yoshino's mind, as he remembered the deed from a few days ago. His whole body had been thoroughly felt up, he had been made love to, and reduced to tears. At that time, he thought he had been Yanase's replacement, but now that he knew Hatori's feelings, he could not calm down.

“I- I wish the bath would heat up faster.....” Yoshino forced himself to mutter, as he glanced away from Hatori and turned to the mirror. Then as he pretended to wipe his own body, he covered himself with the towel so that Hatori would not be able to see him.

“Oh yeah... Do you use bath additives? I received a load of them from the readers, but I always just take showers, so I can't get rid of them.”

He would not be able to calm down if he did not talk about something different. Flustered, Yoshino tried to stand on his tiptoes to take the bath additives off from the shelf above the sink, but he stopped when he suddenly heard Hatori whisper behind him.

“.....How was the kiss?”

“Wha- what do you mean 'how'.....?”

“Did you find out whether it was disgusting?”

Yoshino could not avoid his gaze as it was caught in the reflection of the mirror, and he was so nervous that his mouth began to get dry. Thinking to wet his dry mouth, Yoshino swallowed and somehow this behavior seemed lewd to him.

“...It...it wasn't...particularly disgusting, but...”

“But?”

“But.....”

What do I mean 'but'!? I mean, what's with this girlie mode...!?

While Yoshino was confused and faltering with his words, Hatori drew in closer to him.

“.....Are you seducing me with that face?” Hatori said close to Yoshino's ear, and slowly pulled down the towel draped around Yoshino's shoulders. It dropped to the floor and Yoshino, in a fluster, began to bend down to pick up the towel, but Hatori's arms did not let him do that. Hatori embraced Yoshino's bare back from behind, and Yoshino felt his own heart go still. When they were children, they romped with each other, but this was the first time they had touched skin to skin this way.

“If you're not, then stop doing this.”

“T- Tori.....?”

Yoshino's heart stirred to this unusually serious tone of voice. Hatori buried his face into Yoshino's shoulder and uttered out in a thin voice, “I love you, Chiaki...”

“.....”

Why is he calling me by my name at this time...?

It had been years since Hatori had called him by his name. In elementary school, no, up until the time they were in kindergarten, they had called each other by their first names.

As they grew up, however, they began to feel it was awkward, and without realizing, they came to find themselves not calling each other by the first names.

“To...ri...”

Hatori held him in his cold arms; but Hatori's heartbeat passed through Yoshino's back and it was stronger and faster than his own.

He is nervous too.....

Yoshino realized. He could not move as he felt the heartbeat, and then after some time, Hatori bit him on the back of his neck as if to say he could not stand it any longer.

“Tch.....!”

When Hatori sucked on the tender skin, his tongue crawled on the back of Yoshino's neck and this forced Yoshino to bend his neck backward. Hatori licked in a straight line.

The burning sensation made Yoshino's body tremble.

“Chiaki.”

He shot Yoshino a sharp glance through the mirror as he inserted his tongue into his ear.

“Haah!”

Yoshino could hear a wet sound from the inside of his ear and unintentionally let out a foolish voice. Nevertheless, Yoshino was captured by Hatori's gaze and could not escape from his clutch.

“Is it okay? Chiaki.....if you won't run from me, I'll hold you.”

That was an ultimatum. However, Yoshino's throat was parched, so he could not get out the words to tell him to stop. Hatori's grip began to weaken, but Yoshino glared back at him through the mirror with annoyance.

“It...it can't be helped...”

“---Thank you.”

Then Hatori suddenly twirled Yoshino's body around to face him, and then for some reason knelt down to face Yoshino's feet.

“Hold on to that.”

Yoshino was instructed to hold on to the sink and he obeyed, without even knowing the reason; then Hatori forcefully pulled down Yoshino's wet jeans, which were plastered to his skin, along with his underwear.

“To- Tori!?”

Hatori paid no heed to Yoshino, who exclaimed in surprise, and checked Yoshino's exposed member by coiling his fingers around it.

“It's so cold. Don't worry. I'll make it heat up soon.”

“Huh...?”

For a moment, he felt dubious about what Hatori was saying, then immediately after, Yoshino's member was concealed in Hatori's mouth.

“.....!”

Yoshino had never been to any sex services, or had any of the girls he dated given him a blowjob. His head was in chaos from the bewilderment and the shame, but his body started heating up immediately, just like Hatori had said.

“Uh.....ah.....!”

Hatori did not display any air of hesitation towards this body of the same sex, and carefully glided his tongue over him. He gripped Yoshino's shaking hips, licked behind the shaft, sucked the very tip, and bore right into the pit with the tip of his tongue.

“.....Kuh.....!”

Only wet sounds and heavy breathing could be heard in the cramped bathhouse. This was the first time Yoshino was afforded such irresistible pleasure, and he concentrated all his power to holding on to the edge of the sink.

Seriously.....This is bad.....

He was enveloped in a sticky feeling and somehow managed to stifle his automatic sigh from escaping. And yet, Hatori continued on as if trying to make Yoshino feel this way; he crushed it in his mouth with his lips and rubbed the completely stiff manhood with his fingers.

His racing heartbeat was carving into his mind, and he felt his semen running inside him that told him it was only a matter of time before his desire spilled out.

“.....Let...let go.....”

“It's fine. Let it out as it is.” Hatori said that with an extremely matter-of-fact expression and took Yoshino's erection into his mouth all over again. Then he put all his passion into toying with Yoshino, who was already nearing his limit. Hatori squeezed around him and tightly sucked on him so as to invite Yoshino to climax.

“Kuh! Ah.....! Tori...! That's enough...”

Yoshino inserted his fingers into Hatori's stiff hair and desperately tried to push his head away from himself. However, Yoshino's body was swayed by pleasure and there was no power left in his fingers to resist Hatori. Then Hatori squeezed him with his fingers a couple of times, stimulating the tip of Yoshino's manhood, and Yoshino came easily.

“No, ah...AAH...!”

Yoshino's body trembled nervously and he ejected his desire right into the inside of Hatori's mouth. His mind turned blank from the pleasure the climax brought him, but he came back to his senses the moment he saw Hatori swallow what was inside his mouth.

“What did you swallow just now...?!”

Yoshino shook him by the shoulders, but Hatori looked calm and wiped him mouth.

“It's yours.”

“Spit it out! Spit it out right now!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean 'why'.....? It's dirty!!”

“If it's yours then it's not dirty. Besides that, did it feel good?”

“Huh? Ah...uh...yeah....I guess.....”

He ended the sentence weakly since he was embarrassed. He was so glad the moment he realized he was not weak at his knees, but when he realized the act had been one-sided, he was further embarrassed.

“That's good.”

“.....!”

Don't laugh like that now...

Usually he was cold mannered, and yet, why was he giving him a sweet smile at a time like this? However, the smile instantly turned tense and bitter.

“Sorry, I'm also at my limit.”

“Huh?”

Yoshino's body was shifted around again by Hatori, who had stood up, and he was forced to face the sink once more. Then, for some reason, Hatori took the shaving cream off from the shelf, put it into his hands, and began to smear it between Yoshino's legs.

“Tch...! What are you doing?!!!”

When Yoshino complained, his body jumping from the coolness of it, Hatori apologized to him.

“Please bear with it today. I'm going to do a proper preparation next.”

“N- next? Ngh...!”

While he was asking himself how is there a next, Hatori's finger forced its way inside Yoshino. The slime covered finger entered unexpectedly smoothly. Although the foreign object was stiff, it did not feel painful at all.

.....Come to think of it, Tori's fingers are quite thick, aren't they?

All of a sudden, he recalled the thick shape of the finger joints and the graphic image in his mind raised his body temperature.

“You seem fine.”

“Huh? Wah, ah, no way! Wai-!.....Ah!”

When he was spacing out, Hatori used the cream to easily insert his finger and began to move inside Yoshino as if he were drawing a circle.

“I said wait! Ah, ngh!”

“Does it hurt?”

“It doesn't hurt, but...it feels strange...”

But it hurt a lot a few days ago.....

The feeling of the finger wiggling inside him could only be described as strange, but the spasm-like pain from a few days ago did not come upon him. As a matter of fact,

each time the walls of his insides were pressed, the depths of his hips ached and he weakly cried out in delight.

“Ngh...! Ngh.....”

Hatori added another finger in the spot, that was gradually beginning to grow tender, and slowly continued to pull it in and out. This added a little bit more pressure, but more than that, the sensation of being rubbed from the inside had stolen Yoshino's awareness of it. However, he noticed that the fingers were moving like they were searching for something within him, and simultaneously a sweet voice escaped from his throat without his realizing it.

“...Aah!”

“Here?”

“Haah! What's...there...ah! Aah!”

When a certain spot inside his body was pressed, ecstasy went running to his head. Up till now, he had not known that such a place existed in his own body.

Wha- what is this.....?

Hatori rummaged within Yoshino relentlessly, and continued to loosen the firmly shut narrow opening. Then when Yoshino became out of breath, the finger was extracted and a hot, hard object was put in its place.

“.....”

The familiar sensation numbed his limbs. The memory of the pain awoke Yoshino's fears. Eventually, he felt the tension of Hatori's heat tugging on him without ceasing.

“No, I...can't.....!”

Yoshino was on the verge of collapsing when Hatori whispered to him as if he were imploring him.

“.....I, won't force you to feel like this anymore.”

Consequently, he accepted him-----

The moment he relaxed just a little bit to those words, the tip of Hatori's cock entered inside him. Last time it had not been so quick and had pushed its way in slowly. The very moment Yoshino affirmed there was no pain, his body relaxed.

“.....Ah.....ah.....”



The walls of his insides accepted and wrapped around Hatori's magnificence as it carefully began to make its way in. It did not feel like he was being torn in two, rather, it felt like being filled up.

“Chiaki, can I move?”

Hatori had inserted everything in and he asked from behind with a hoarse voice full of desire. When he looked up, he saw that in the reflection of the mirror Hatori was wrinkling his forehead and looked tense. The very moment he saw that face, Yoshino's heart ached for some reason.

...Why does my heart ache...?

“Chiaki?”

He expected Hatori to not be able to stand it any longer, but he looked like he did not plan on moving until he heard Yoshino's reply. However, he could see that Hatori was under great stress from inserting his manhood inside him.

“.....All right.”

Yoshino answered as he withstood the unknown pain in his chest. Then Hatori exhaled a small sigh and began to move their intertwined hips. At first slowly, but then little by little he lost control.

“Ah...! ...Ah...HAAH.....!”

He rummaged inside the deeply connected place and thrust into him as if excavating his insides. The attack felt strong; rather than the pain he feared, it was ecstasy. His shaking body seemed like it would melt and fall apart at any moment.

“No...! Ah, ah...AAH---!”

In order to support his unstable body, Yoshino held on to the sink with all his might that his veins clearly stood out on his hands.

Last time, he had fainted from the pain, but now only a strong pleasure was trying to steal Yoshino's consciousness.

“---Chiaki, call out my name.”

“Tori...your...name?”

“Yeah.”

“...Yoshiyuki...?”

The moment he said his first name that he was being asked to say, Hatori happily let out a small laugh. The laughter embarrassed him, and strangely he felt his chest turn warm.

“Yeah, more. Call it out more.”

“Aah...! Ah! Yoshi...yuki.....!”

While Hatori pestered him like a child, he did not ease his molesting hand. He continued thrusting violently and their sweat dripped onto the sink.

“Yoshiyuki...! Ah! No, I'm...coming.....”

If this continued, he would turn to jelly; he was not himself anymore. When he moaned that he was at his limit, the intensity of the pressure increased further. And when the chaos made everything incomprehensible, a sweet whisper was lowered into his ear.

“I love you, Chiaki.”

“.....”

His insides vibrated violently and at the same time the inner most part of his body gradually turned wet. Hatori also knew that he had reached his limit just like Yoshino himself had from the heat pouring into him.

“Chiaki...”

Hatori suddenly embraced his sweaty body from behind and buried his face into his shoulder.

.....Somehow, this is bad...

For some reason, Yoshino looked away from the warm feeling welling up inside him, as he slowly placed his hands over the arms that embraced him. Even though his body was enveloped in exhilaration, his mind was strangely tranquil.

「CHAPTER 6」

"It's boring."

"Wha-!!!"

Yoshino and Hatori were discussing the upcoming manuscript at the usual cafe. Hatori had skimmed through the storyboard Yoshino had brought, as Yoshino somehow controlled his anger against these harsh words.

All right then, I'll listen to what he has to say!

Then Hatori began a string of lectures aimed at Yoshino, who had rested his back against the seat.

"Lately the quality of your storyboard dropped, am I right? How can I say this, it's lifeless. The readers want excitement, you know. And yet, what's with this dull plot? Perhaps age is getting to you?"

".....!"

This.....fucking editor.....saying such hurtful things.....

Yoshino did not know that he was sugarcoating his words as Hatori endlessly began listing the things Yoshino was worried about himself.

"Or do you not have enough motivation? The readers are very sensitive to pop culture. Did you carefully look over all of the material I sent you?"

"I DID look over it! But isn't it uninteresting because it's the editor's fault? The guy who pretends to be the best is really a pushy guy, so I might have gotten discouraged!"

"....."

Hatori frowned and fell silent at Yoshino's comeback and then fixed his gaze down upon the storyboard.

Oh, this probably did the trick. I'm the one who keeps getting told off.

Yoshino was pleased, thinking Hatori received some damage, as he was about to reach across the table for a melon soda, but right then his hand was caught and plastered to the table.

"Huh?"

Then the moment Yoshino happened to look up at Hatori, who had stood up for some reason, Hatori seized him by the collar of his shirt with his other hand and locked their lips.

"Mmph, mmph---! Mmmphhh-----!?"

After Hatori ran his tongue all over the inside of Yoshino's mouth to fit his satisfaction, he pushed him away as if nothing had happened. When Yoshino was left stunned, Hatori sat back down in the chair, crossed his long legs, looking like he was embarrassed, and began speaking with a serious expression.

"This is your only punishment if you're going to show me boring things. As your punishment, I'll do things I want to do. If you don't like that, then draw interesting things as if your life depended on it. It's like killing two birds with one stone, isn't it?"

"Wha-.....?"

He did not understand what had been told to him at that moment, but as he thought over Hatori's words, Yoshino came to his senses and hastily retorted back.

"Hey! What IS this?!"

"You're the one who said you couldn't do it because it wasn't exciting. I recommend you toughen up. You should even thank me for this."

"What are you saying?! I was tough from the very beginning!"

Yoshino was in a fury as he glared at Hatori. He was red in the face, losing his temper and everything, but he wanted Hatori to think it was because he was angry. He definitely did not want Hatori to know the fact that the thumping of his heart was due to the sudden kiss.

I knew it, should I have changed editors?

He could not reward Hatori with the lover's relationship that Hatori wished for, and not understanding the reason for being kissed like this, Yoshino wanted him to stop. Talk of changing editors had finally ended from Hatori; because of Yoshino's opposition, he had dropped this matter. Nonetheless, from an author's point of view, he thought keeping the capable Hatori as his editor by his side was the right decision; but when he considered his personal problems, he honestly had doubts. In the corner of his mind he was regretting this just a little bit; and yet, Yoshino had a feeling that he would never

separate from Hatori for as long as he lives. He realized that someday, the day when he would no longer rely on Hatori had to come, but right now he still needed Hatori.

I didn't want to be separated from him and went as far as to do such a thing and prevented him from leaving, so I guess I have somewhat of a desire to keep him all to myself.....

With everything that had happened, Yoshino realized that he himself wanted Hatori to stay beside him, even if he had no reason for it and it was not work related. But in the end, even though he tried to see what a physical relationship would be like, nothing had changed on the surface, and he was not able to make his own feelings clear either.

"....."

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Huh? Ah, no- nothing!"

Hatori found the silence strange as he peered into his face, and Yoshino, in a fluster, turned away from him.

He did not know what would be said to him if he remembered the events from that day and if it became known that he remembered. Now he started to remember this matter from a few days ago and immediately expelled the memory from his head. If he remembered the whole thing in detail, he would not be able to concentrate on work. But without a doubt he felt like Hatori was making his heart throb more than before.....

No, why did he even think he experienced this heart throbbing before?

Is this 'love'...?

He kept asking himself that, but of course the answer was not evident. The problem was WHAT was causing his heart to thump faster. When it comes to imagining things, an author is far more imaginative than anyone, so Yoshino decided not to be embarrassed anymore if Hatori made any sort of move on him, since he had already foreseen it.

Then Hatori interrogated him once again, ".....What are you making these foolish faces for?"

"Huh? Ah! No, nothing..."

"If you don't have enough motivation, should I do it again? Or, something even better?"

"Don't be stupid!"

His heart leapt up again as he realized what he had meant. In order to hide it, he grabbed the glass covered with water droplets on the outside and took the straw in his mouth.

The sweet juice and refreshing fizziness made him calm down a little bit.

".....Well, at least you've become aware..."

"..? Did you say something?"

When Yoshino looked up, not being able to hear the small whisper, Hatori smirked at him.

"Never mind. Try to make the storyboard interesting already!"

"I get it! Shut up!"

.....Still, how come I never live up to his expectations.....?

Unlike Yoshino's heavy sigh, the sound of the ice in the empty glass was light and cool.

「CHAPTER 7」

Yoshino Chiaki was in a tight corner.

Usually, he did not pay attention to the ringing of the alarm clock, but now he was pressed for time as he had irritated many people.

He began drawing manga as a child, debuted as a manga artist – by the pen name Yoshikawa Chiharu – during the time he was in university, and now the 28-year old has become popular. Even though he got faster at drawing the manuscript, it did not mean it had gotten any easier.

Ugh.....I was doing so well until recently.....

He had not delayed the storyboards or the manuscripts for many months and was able to finish everything on time with the deadline. But now he had fallen into such a huge slump that everything before seemed like a dream. The best explanation for this current delay was the fact that he had been having a hard time finishing up the storyboard. He had hit rock bottom ever since he came back from the hot springs trip which he had went to for 2 days and 1 night after finishing his previous work; and consequently, he lost all of his ideas. He was in such a deep slump that he could not remember what he had been working on up until now.

The schedule had slowly dragged on due to all sorts of things and somehow he had completed the storyboard the day before the deadline. Yoshino did not have a quick hand from the start, so it was impossible for him to finish the manuscript in one night. In the end, he asked if the deadline could be extended for him and it came to be so.

I should probably apologize to the printers now.....

Before manga appears in magazines and catches the eyes of the readers, it passes many people such as the editor, the printer, and the workers at the agency and the bookstore. When he was behind in his work, those people were also behind in theirs. However, it didn't mean they would postpone the release date and he had to force them to do it. Anyway, as he wholeheartedly moved his hand across the paper thinking of finishing the manuscript as fast as possible, a soft voice called out to him:

“Um, sir. I finished applying the tones on this manuscript. Do you have any other inking for me to do?”

“Hmm.....let's see. Can you please do this one here? But ink only this scene. And then can you bring it to me when you're done?”

“Okay.”

After he handed over the manuscript where the ink was in the process of drying and told her a few more instructions, he turned back to the blank manuscript again. Then he nervously counted how many sheets of the manuscript he still had to do and gave out a big sigh. Half of the manuscript was still unfinished even though he was way past the official deadline.

Now that Tori guy is pretty angry.....

Hatori Yoshiyuki, Yoshino's childhood friend and editor in charge of him, had given him the OK on the storyboard, but after that, not only had they not met up, but they also had not talked on the phone at all and only communicated business related matters through e-mail. In the past, Hatori gave him the silent treatment when he was actually angry with him. Even though there was a few times they had exchanged a small amount of necessary conversation, his tone of voice was always cold and blunt. This kind of Hatori was so scary that Yoshino seemed to prefer best the Hatori who would yell at him.

But of course he'd be angry with me right now.

Being unable to keep up with the deadlines was not the only reason Hatori was angry with him. Yoshino promised that he would finish the storyboard before he left for the hot springs trip, but he broke that promise, because it wasn't like he was doing bad and falling behind with the storyboard. And ever after he returned from the trip, he decided he would make it in time and spent a few days in idleness.

Yoshino had been reading all the manga he had missed that had accumulated in his home, while Hatori warned him many times to 'finish ahead of time'. But smooth-tongued Yoshino got brave and disregarded Hatori's warnings by telling him: 'chill out, it's fine', and did not let go of the manga he had begun reading. If he were to go at his usual pace, this time he would also have met the deadline with time to spare. He had been cruising along, and he didn't suspect for there to be a reason that things would not go well.

Just because I didn't invite him on the trip he's got some kind of grudge against me.....

Yoshino had invited his assistant and friend from middle school, Yanase Yuu, on the hot springs trip. He had won the tickets for this trip in a lottery at the shopping district, but since the expiration date for the tickets was approaching, he thought that if he invited the busy Hatori it would be a nuisance for Hatori, so he had called Yanase instead. He had felt bad that he had not invited Hatori but wasn't it childish of him to become so sulky? Besides that, it looked like he was displeased that Yoshino had gone with Yanase. For some reason Hatori was not happy that Yoshino was involved with Yanase. Yanase also talked bad about Hatori and it seemed like they disliked one another.

They've known each other for such a long time so they should get along.....

How on earth could he make those two get along?

As he sighed, for he could not think of a good solution to this, a female assistant immediately called out a warning to him:

“Sir, don’t stop moving your hand!”

“Ah! Sorry!”

That's right. He was in a middle of a crisis right now, this was not the time to be thinking of things that had nothing to do with the manuscript. He quickly adjusted his grip on his mechanical pencil and began to move his hand over the paper again. Right now, the scene he was drawing was of the protagonist being stubborn and not honest in front of the guy she liked. Saying only the opposite things from what she was actually thinking and then regretting her words when she was alone. The more you like someone the more you feel frustrated at yourself for not being honest. This protagonist will have sympathy from many readers.

.....But, wait?

Yoshio's hand suddenly stopped as he was drawing the protagonist's facial expression, which was full of disgust with herself, and recalled the previous time he had gone to the editorial department to deliver the manuscript. After he had given the manuscript to the editor in charge, he had been struck by sudden rain and then witnessed Hatori and Yanase arguing next to the office building where he had been taking shelter from the rain. At that time, it looked like Hatori was kissing Yanase, but that had been a serious misunderstanding. Because of what he had seen, Yoshino had been under the impression that Hatori liked Yanase, but then Hatori told Yoshino 'I love you'.

.....That means Yuu kissed Hatori at that time?

Yanase did things his own way and did not have good social skills, but the only person he treated so cruelly was Hatori. Perhaps Yanase was not being honest when he attacked Hatori with insulting remarks. Surely he was hiding his embarrassment by being rude and displaying opposite feelings of love. And there was no need to worry about the constant bickering between these two, right? Yanase was what you would call 'hates what he really loves' type of guy.

Oh, so YUU likes Tori. I see, I see.....but how is THAT not that bad!?

Yanase liked Hatori and Hatori liked Yoshino. This was obviously a love triangle. But, he didn't understand his own feelings.

What do I.....think about all of this.....? I don't hate it but...

He seriously didn't understand it yet. In order to prevent Hatori from leaving – who had tried to leave him feeling all confused – the fact that Yoshino now had an intimate relationship with him was irreversible.

The first time had been against his will but the second time they both had certainly agreed on it; then this meant that it was he who had stolen Yanase's crush?

“.....” He was seized with guilt and bewilderedness.

For a split second Yoshino thought that he should tell Yanase about what was going on with him and Hatori, but if he did that, their relationship as a trio might become even more complicated. He definitely had to make sure that Yanase did not find out about this. He also had to warn Hatori not to say strange things in front of Yanase.

First things first, I'll tell Tori everything.....no, that'll be bad too...

Although the status of their relationship was mutual, Hatori will be furious if Yoshino told him, 'Yuu likes you, you know?'. Anyone would be shocked to have your partner tell you that someone else likes you.

But, was Yanase really not suspicious of Yoshino and Hatori? There was only one time he had acted strange. It seemed like he did not care about the things going on around him but he did have a sharp intuition. It was possible that he had realized that something had changed but pretended not to know and said nothing about it.....

.....No way.

If he had realized this, it would be impossible for him to continue being his assistant the way he had been before. Yanase was Yoshino's dear friend and an indispensable assistant.

In order for things to be back to the way they were before, he had no choice but to take this secret – his relationship with Hatori – to the grave, at all costs. Besides, his relationship with Hatori was far from moving on to the next level; they weren't even kissing. They were both so busy that intimacy was out of the question at the moment and even when they met up, they only discussed work. If he didn't mess up, he would be able to carry their secret to the grave.

But, carelessness is unacceptable.

No matter how much he thought that everything would work out, it was reasonable to think that Hatori would carelessly let it all slip out. Just to be on the safe side, he should think ahead about the worst possible scenario. If he did not think ahead about when Yanase supposedly was to find out about everything, his on the spur of the moment solution would be to act confused. However, it wasn't easy to think up good ideas and no matter how much he played out different scenarios in his head, he only envisioned bad things.

I'm a shoujo manga artist and yet why can't I think of anything?! I should compare this with the story from a manga and take it as an example, as an example!

He tried to admonish himself but it was hopeless. Besides, even if he decided to use characters from a manga, he didn't know what to do when all three characters were men.

.....Well, this IS a different genre.....

He read manga of all sorts of genre as long as they were interesting, but thinking up a story was a different matter.

He was at his wit's end, when an assistant stood up from her seat and came over to show him the finished manuscript.

“I'm done with this. Can you please check it over?”

“Mm, okay.”

“I know that you don't have the next page, but isn't there anything I can do?”

“Huh? I didn't finish? What should I do...?”

All the assistants that came exclusively to Yoshino had excellent fast hands. Yoshino almost always finished inking before the assistants came up to him, but this time, they had caught up to him just like that, while he was still drawing. On top of that, he only made small progress because he was pondering.

“I only have this beta almost done but here...”

He nervously told her while handing over one sheet of the inked manuscript, and sure enough, he was scolded.

“Wait a minute, sir! You didn't make any progress?! Please hurry up and draw without slacking!”

“I'm - I'm not slacking! I'm just thinking about the plot of the manga.....”

He quietly tried to make an excuse but the skilled assistants did not listen to him.

“Yeah, yeah. Please don't escape from reality, okay? This manuscript is due tomorrow morning!”

He dejectedly slumped his shoulders since they did not take him seriously. In truth, he could not afford to ponder but he felt annoyed at them even though he allowed them to help him out.

Oh, that's right!

Just then, he suddenly came up with a good idea. If he consulted with his assistants about his situation from a story's point of view, he might hear an objective suggestion.

If I were a girl, I would probably look at my guy from a different perspective.....

Yoshino boldly began to talk, harboring faint hope.

“Um...say, do you guys mind giving me some tips for the story's plot.....?”

“Only if you continue drawing!”

“Okay, okay!” He seriously could not talk back to the girls.

“Is this for the upcoming scene? Or a new story?”

“A new story, I suppose.”

Yoshino recollected himself and began to explain. Naturally, he knew that a story with all three characters being men would arouse suspicion, so he kept Hatori a man and decided to replace himself and Yanase as girl characters.

“A, B, and C have a good inseparable relationship, but A loves B and C loves A. B knows about both A and C's feelings but doesn't want to get separated from A, so B somehow accepts A's confession, but can't tell this to C. What would happen, in this case, if C finds out about A?”

When he told them the gist of it, the assistants exchanged their thoughts with one another.

“Wow, that's a mess.....”

“That's a typical plot, but if it were me, I would keep the friendship.”

His heart was pounding as he observed their reactions, and then one assistant asked him.

“Weell...is B the protagonist?”

“Um, yeah, I.....guess.....?” He was like this for a while, because it meant that this was directed at Yoshino himself. However, he did not want it to appear as if he was seeking advice for himself, so he beat around the bush.

“If that's the case, then I think the most important thing is for B to do what she wants.”

“But if B is the protagonist, I can't empathize with her. Being so indecisive annoys me. Somehow this story doesn't seem like you, sir.”

“Uh.....ye- yeah.....” He was shocked to have it told to him so bluntly.

Surely, everything he told them about the protagonist had been positive, so he was confused, but was definitely not about to shrink away from it. He became miserable, realizing that he needed to receive advice from the readers.

.....I am indecisive after all.....

Being in a relationship was not his forte from the start, but he was still embarrassed at himself that he was so indecisive when it came down to his own matters. He had a girlfriend for a while when he was in university. But that too had been through an introduction by a friend. They hit it off well at a college joint party, became friends, and then somehow started dating. It was not a romance like those portrayed in manga. Hatori had been the first person to come out and confess to him. The girls continued talking, not having noticed that Yoshino was sighing at the incisive comment.

“Even though she decides to go out with A, keeping this a secret and saying that she wants to continue being friends with C is selfish. Besides, I feel sorry for A for being in a relationship that has half-assed feelings.”

“It's probably more realistic like this, but girls don't want to see you drawing this kind of story. You shouldn't go down such an adult-ish path, sir.”

“Haha.....That's true.....” He had no choice but to laugh now.

He was getting depressed more and more and as his shoulders drooped dejectedly, one girl hit the bull's eye: “Oh? Perhaps this is about you, sir?”

“N- no, no! I said it's the plot of the story!” He quickly denied it, but it seemed like it was not a good idea to be this unnecessarily flustered. The girls pestered him further.

“How fishy...”

“So is A you, sir?”

“Wow, I feel sorry for you, sir.....”

“I told you it's not me!”

They did not have a manuscript to work with so it seemed like the girls, with nothing to do, had too much spare time, and they began to make fun of the restless Yoshino.

Suddenly Yanase showed up, disturbing the atmosphere.

“.....What are you all so worked up about?”

“Yu- Yuu.....!”

Because he had given Yanase – his friend from high school – a duplicate key, it had recently become common for him to enter without ringing the doorbell. He had been at another artist's place until this morning, so because of lack of sleep, he was exhausted and had dark circles beneath his eyes. He had a fair complexion from the start, so now his pale face stood out way too much.

Actually, he planned on coming to Yoshino's place yesterday but was weighed down by his previous work. Yanase was going to refuse to do the work and come help Yoshino out, but Yoshino prohibited this because Yoshino had never wanted to make Yanase abandon his work and because it seemed like Yanase had more time to help him than help out other authors. Yoshino told him it was all right for him not to come because

he was probably tired from staying up all night, but Yanase exerted himself and came to Yoshino's place right after he was done with his previous work.

The riled up girls informed Yanase, who stepped in: “Yanase, please listen to this, it seems like sir is worried about his current love affair.”

“I told you it's the plot of the story!” Yoshino corrected her, although he was panicking inside. He would never reveal that Yanase was one of the characters. When he observed Yanase's face, while praying that he was not suspicious of anything, he saw that Yanase had a cold stare as if he were saying 'I don't give a damn'.

“Oh, really. I don't care, but before you talk about the plot of the next story, why don't you hurry up and do the work in front of you? The deadline passed a long time ago, didn't it?”

“.....Sorry.....”

They received a proper 'tsukkoku'¹ and thought better about their actions.

Yanase pushed himself to come over even after having such a tough night. No matter how easygoing Yanase was, he was not happy that they were getting all worked up over a matter that had nothing to do with the manuscript. The girls stopped talking, having lost interest since Yanase's reaction disappointed them.

“You guys won't get finished if you run your mouths and not your hands.”

“But we can't do anything if sir hasn't finished inking. We finished everything else and were about to cut and paste the scene but.....”

Yanase frowned when he heard that and heaved a sigh. Yoshino shrank back from the cat-like almond shaped eyes that glared at him.

“Sir, being forced to wait is the worst, you know?”

“I- I get it already!”

I'm worrying about you!

¹ Note: A tsukkomi is the 'logical guy' in manzai – a traditional Japanese stand up comedy of two performers: boke (funny man) and tsukkomi. When boke says or does something ridiculous, the tsukkomi criticizes the boke. Tsukkoku is the action of scolding the boke.

He thought that, but didn't say it. If he told this to him, the situation would just get more and more complicated. In any case, right now his top priority was to finish the material before him. He could worry later. He told himself this and decided to concentrate on the manuscript.

* * * *

“Good.....I'm done..,” tired Yoshino muttered quietly as he collapsed to the floor. He was relieved at being able to escape from the fear of not being done with the work, once and for all.

“Good job. I'm going to clean up over here so why don't you either sleep or take a bath?”

“It's okay. I'll clean up later.”

“It's troublesome if I leave it up to you, Chiaki.”

“.....Thank you, then.....”

Even the girls, who usually commuted to and fro his home, stayed up all night to help him and somehow the manuscript was completed. The original deadline had been extended for him to be on the morning of today. But even then, he was unable to finish on time, so they gave him another extension until the evening, and he called the motorbike delivery service in advance to come pick it up for him. However, even the motorbike delivery service had to wait for one hour and Yoshino paid them a good amount in extra fees. Nevertheless, he brought all of this upon himself. There wasn't much to be done about the great deal of trouble he had caused Yanase, Hatori, his assistants, and the printers.

He was in the room with Yanase, as the girls had already left, and now it was just the two of them. Yoshino felt like a corpse, so he didn't care about this fact, and Yanase was putting away the tones that were all over the place due to the chaos of trying to finish on time. Not only was he organizing them to be in the numerical order, but he was also writing down the number of tones that Yoshino was short of.

What a nice guy.....

While deeply reflecting about how grateful he was that Yanase was his friend, he remembered the events from the previous day. Wasn't Yanase bothered at all about what

the assistants had told him? From the time he was a student, Yanase was not the type to get involved with gossip, but wouldn't he be even a little bit interested if the talk was about the love life of his close friend? Even if Yanase were interested, he probably wouldn't suspect that anything had happened with Hatori, but Yoshino could not erase the uneasiness. Yoshino watched Yanase, who was moving around through the chaos, but he completely did not have a clue what Yanase, who usually did not change his facial expression much, was thinking about.

It's good that he's not bothered by it but.....

Just like the girl assistants had said, it was probably a selfish wish to want to have the same relationship with them as it was now. But Yoshino was unable to choose between either of the two. As he heaved a sigh to himself for not being manly, the doorbell rang.

“.....Who could it be at this hour.....?”

When Yoshino did not move, as he had no energy to stand up, Yanase went over to the intercom instead.

“Yes?”

“It's me. Open up, I forgot my key.”

“.....But... Chiaki.....?”

The familiar voice coming out from the speaker was one he had not heard for about 3 days.

“Is it Tori? Sorry Yuu, let him in.....”

“Fine.”

Yoshino asked Yanase to unlock the door, and as he lay on the spot he had collapsed in, a voice called down to him with dismay: “What's with that appearance?You look tired.”

“I have no energy to move anymore.”

He had been drawing the manuscript, not taking any rest, even while obtaining permission from his assistants to take a nap. Although he had brought this upon himself, he was at the limit of his physical ability.

“You haven't eaten yet, have you?”

The moment Hatori said that, Yoshino's stomach grumbled loudly.

“.....Ah.....”

“That would be you. You haven't eaten decent food the whole time you were working on the manuscript. I'm going to make you something nice to fill your stomach with, so wait,” said Hatori, as he placed the supermarket bag on the table and took off his jacket. He unbuttoned the collar on his white shirt, rolled up his sleeves, and put on an apron in an experienced manner. Yoshino figured it would be rude to stay collapsed on the floor so he crawled up on the dinning chair and sat down.

When he absentmindedly watched Hatori setting up the meal, he noticed that he also had dark circles underneath his eyes.

Aah.....a good-looking man has been ruined.....

To be tired from work was admirable, but having to exert yourself to such an extent just looked pitiful. His chest ached with apology thinking that it had been he himself who had forced Hatori to have such an appearance. Surely, Hatori must have come straight to him today after finishing with work. Hatori, who was tired, had even gone shopping in order to prepare a meal for him.

“You have something to say?”

“Huh? Ah, no.....” It looked like Hatori noticed that he was staring at him. In order to fix the situation, he asked him a reasonable question: “Say, umm.....did you deliver the material to the printers?”

“I wouldn't be here if I didn't. The people at the printing room sure kept glaring at me.”

“S- sorry.....”

He chose the wrong question. He had brought up the topic that was better off not being touched right now. However, even if he had been belittled, he would be unable to defend himself because this matter had been completely his fault.

“Instead of apologizing, stick to the assigned deadline. If you can't do that, it shows you're lacking self-awareness.”

“.....I'll be careful from now on.”

What Hatori said was very reasonable, so he didn't have any words to say back to him.



“You're a professional, aren't you? You're different from a newbie who has just debuted. At least be aware of your own pace.”

“So annoying.....”

“.....!”

Pretending he wasn't listening in on them, Yanase quietly muttered as he organized the tones. It appeared that what Yanase had said to himself had reached Hatori's ears, causing him to make a sour face.

Don't say something that's going to make the situation worse.....!

Even though Hatori was already angry, after being further irritated, he became scary.

“How much longer are you going to be here? Are you planning on eating?”

“When I'm done cleaning up, I'm heading over to an assistant's place, so no. Besides, the seasoning you use is too strong.”

“.....Mine is the common one. It doesn't agree with you since you just eat everything plain.”

“Looks like you just don't know how it really tastes like.”

Yoshino couldn't interrupt the awkward atmosphere between Yanase – who was wearing a cold expression – and Hatori – who had a stiffened expression.

Please make peace.....

Why couldn't these two get along? Just like with Yoshino, both Hatori and Yanase had known each other since middle school, but Yoshino felt like the awkwardness between them was increasing year after year.

If Yuu is in love with Tori, he should just be honest about it.

Yoshino understood the feeling of being stubborn, but he thought it would probably be better for Yuu to stop putting on the show at some point. If anything, it seemed like Hatori was suspecting some rivalry. As he was at a loss of what to do about this, Hatori, who had recollected himself, brought a matter up to Yoshino: “Yoshino, I heard that you wrote 'I won't be attending' again to our company's end of the year party. Is that true?”

The sudden interrogation startled him. It had been mentioned to him before, but he didn't need to remember it at this particular time. Every year, at the time of the year-

end gathering around December 20th, Marukawa Shoten Publishing Company sponsored a party that was open to every department. The authors, who wrote for Marukawa Shoten Publishing Company, and the staff, were invited, but Yoshino had never participated even once up till now.

“You have to come just this once. Your work is being made into a drama this time. Even the staff will be there and yet the only author who is thoughtless enough to not greet people will be you. I'll make sure that other people won't find out that Yoshikawa Chiharu is a man, so come.”

Even though he was lightly admonished, he was reluctant to go regardless. As a member of society, it is very important to be social, and he figured that he should at least greet the people concerned with his work. Though he knew this, Yoshino could not help being shy in front of strangers. Not only was he naturally an indoor-type person, he had chosen to be a manga artist, so he really did not feel like going to a place full of strangers.

“.....No way. I don't even have anything to wear, and besides, don't you know that I don't do well in such fancy places? They can go ahead and make a drama out of it; it doesn't matter. I'm not complaining at all so..... OWW!!”

Before he had finished speaking, Hatori swung his fist into Yoshino's head with a BONG!

“That's not the problem. Just how old are you?!”

“.....”

Just because you become an adult, doesn't mean you can happily cope with everything.

Speaking of greetings.....

He hadn't faked a smile in front of people since he was a high school student, working part time, so he didn't know if he could do it well now. He would have a hard time at the party if he were to be thrown into a place where he didn't know a single person.

Tori can't be with me the whole time.

As an editor, he certainly had to greet other authors he was in charge of, and besides, it was also his duty to move the party along. At times like these, it is lonely if one doesn't have a friend in the same profession. Even if he went to this lively place, he

was sure to be bored if he didn't have anyone to enjoy it with. He should at least bring someone.

.....Oh? I'm pretty sure it'll be okay if I bring a staff member, right?

“.....I'll go if Yuu goes with me.”

“What?” Hatori openly frowned at that and urged him for an answer.

“Because, even if I go, you're not going to be with me the whole time, and I'll be bored if I'm there all by myself. The party isn't only for author's right?

“.....Well, yeah.....if it's your assistant.....”

“Then there's no problem, right?So, Yuu, can you come? Umm...let's see, it's going to be on December 20th. Are you going to be working then?”

“The other authors are going to go to the party too, so I'm free that day.”

This was decided on impulse and it solved one problem.

“Yes! I'll feel safer with Yuu.”

Unlike Yoshino, who was pleased, Hatori looked sullen. Meanwhile, Yanase had finished organizing the tones and just now put the remaining ones on the shelves.

“Ah, but I seriously don't have anything to wear.” Yoshino frowned when he remembered what was inside his own closet. He didn't have any formal attire for the party because he pretty much owned only casual clothes. If he remembered correctly, he had a suit back at his parent's house, but even years ago he had been forced by his parents to wear it to the coming-of-age² ceremony. He had better buy himself a new suit no matter what.

“In that case – ” Hatori began to say something but was interrupted by Yanase, who made a suggestion:

“I'll go shopping with you. I have one free day after I finish working with an assistant.”

“Are you sure? You've finally got a day off, though.”

Manga artists from all sorts of genres needed Yanase, who was famous for being a skilled assistant. He had fewer holidays than Yoshino.

² Note: A Japanese holiday held annually to congratulate all those who have turned 20 years old over the past year in order to help them realize they have become adults.

“You idiot. What are you worrying for? Of course it's okay since it's you, Chiaki. Besides, I want to go shopping too so I might as well go with you since it'll be more fun that way.”

“I'll go then. It's been a while since we hung out.”

“I have a store that I really like so I'll choose something for you there. Chiaki, you're about the same size as me, so there won't be a problem. The clothes will definitely fit you.”

“Really? Awesome!! You're a life saver!”

He had a slight hunch that Hatori had started to say something, but he could ask him about it later. He decided on the time to meet with Yanase and marked the calendar on the wall.

Yuu really is reliable.

Although Yanase was also a manga otaku, he was composed and different from Yoshino's naivety. When they were students, Yanase had let him copy his homework, since Yoshino often forgot to do his own, and stayed behind with him after school in detention. He was rude and cold but always supported him. Although he was probably tired now from meeting with the assistants every day, he told Yoshino 'I'll help you' even in this situation and came running straight to him. If Yanase were not around right now, the manuscript definitely would have been dropped. He was so grateful for Yanase's friendship that he could not thank him enough.

“I don't think I can survive without you, Yuu.”

When he said that, Yanase widened his eyes a little and then gave out a small laugh saying 'No duh!'.

“Well then, I'm gonna go. I'll get in touch with you after I finish work.”

“All right. Good luck!”

When he returned to the dining room after seeing Yanase off to the door, he saw that Hatori had just finished the preparations for the meal. The pot was over the stove so he must be waiting for it to boil. The good smell, that stimulated his appetite, did not match with Hatori, who was emitting an angrier aura than before as he was rolling down his sleeves.

S- scary.....Did I say something bad?

He tried to think if he had any idea as to what it was, but could not remember anything. If he dared to broach the subject, could it be the fact that he had invited Yanase to the party? But he did not expect that it was necessary to be this angry because of that. Somehow, he felt that the situation was irreversible, so this time he opted for an inoffensive topic and began to speak.

“Tha- that reminds me. You were going to say something a while ago, right?”

“.....Not really,” Hatori hissed, after shooting a glance in his direction and frowning even more.

What was that? Did I step on a land mine just now?

He was perplexed, not understanding the reason as to why Hatori was swelling up with anger. Even when he was often in a bad mood due to lack of sleep, to be so upfront about it was unusual. He didn't get it, so he gave up on trying to please him and casually turned on the TV.

“What's the party like? Do celebrities show up?”

“Several cast members from the movie are going to come but there will mostly be authors.”

“I see. I can't imagine being surrounded by all these manga artists.”

“You know you're not the only author,” Hatori said, sounding appalled and causing Yoshino to pout.

“Yeah, but it's just that I have never met other manga artists before. I meant to say that I'm nervous.....”

“That's so like you..... You're not an elementary kid so you can at least come to a party by yourself.”

“You don't get it. When you're working away from people for a very long time, you sometimes get nervous meeting large groups of people, you know?”

That was no excuse, but it was the truth. Sometimes when he went downtown to buy drawing materials, he was overwhelmed by the large amount of people there. While he was walking around he became used to it, but when he came back home, he was often suddenly tired. At such times, he appreciated his secluded lifestyle.

“But I am a little relieved. I don't think I'll be as nervous if Yuu is with me,” he announced, without giving it too much thought, and then suddenly he had his arm grabbed from behind him. “WAH---!?”

The moment he turned around in surprise, his hips were pulled forward and his lips were locked. His mind blanked out from the soft feel of the lips. He began to understand what was happening, and the instant he realized that he was being kissed, his whole body flared up. He was confused about being kissed for the first time in several months.

Wha- what did I do in this type of situation before.....?

While Yoshino was at a loss of what to do, Hatori was not about to stop kissing him. The arm strength pulling his hips forward was strong and it appeared it would not be easy to escape.

“Mhmp, wai-.....mhmp.....”

His lips were being devoured, and a tongue was thrust inside his mouth at the time he had gasped for air. The tongue explored the inside of his mouth and sent a chill down his spine whenever it caught his. Little by little, he came to find that his body was reacting submissively. The moment his nether-region tingled, shame welled up in him.

I'm telling him to wait and yet.....

While Yoshino's mind was spinning in confusion, Hatori pushed his clothes up. When he felt the touch directly on his body, Yoshino immediately thrust Hatori away.

“.....!”

C- crap..... That was stupid.....

He regretted having acted on reflex but could not do anything about this awkward atmosphere.

“S- sorr.....”

He was going to say that he was just embarrassed since he hadn't done this in awhile, not because he disliked it, but he could not get the words to come out smoothly. Had he made Hatori angry by not saying anything to him? Yoshino could not see Hatori's facial expression, for Hatori had his head down, and it stirred up Yoshino's anxiety.



Unable to withstand the heavy silence, the moment he decided to change the atmosphere by saying something anyway, Hatori spoke ahead of him.

“I'm leaving,” said Hatori, with a heavy sigh, and quickly began getting ready to go.

“Huh? You're leaving.....? But, what about the food.....?”

“I have disturbed you. Get some rest today. The food will be done soon, so eat it,” he uttered the words out indifferently, without any emotion.

“Wai- Tori? Hey.....!”

There was no time to call out for him to stop and so Yoshino was left behind, surprised, as Hatori quickly left the room. All by himself, Yoshino was simply stunned.

Should I have stopped him just now?

Even though he was thinking that, he did not have a clue as to what he should have said. The kiss was not particularly unpleasant and it was not like he resisted the action that happened just now. To be honest, it was not like he completely *did not* resist it, but the resistance was different from disgust. He was hopelessly embarrassed. After Hatori had done that, Yoshino felt like he would not be able to stay in the same room as Hatori and eat and have to look at him, so he was glad that Hatori had left. The distance between them as work partners had not changed so their work was not obstructed, but that was not the case when it came down to their private affairs. He had no intention of being prejudiced against love between two men, but he had not expected that he himself would be thrown into this maelstrom, so it was not unusual for him to be bewildered. On top of that, his partner was his childhood friend. For 20 years they had grown up together, but even now, if he were told to take a step forward and become 'lovers' it wouldn't be easy for him to make this change so quickly. They should at the very least take this slow, but since work was their first point of contact, this would not work out, right?

They knew everything about each other, good or bad. Even though Hatori's existence to him was like air, Yoshino had trouble seeing Hatori in this new light. But when it came to intimate circumstances, it was strange, because his heart would pound at seeing Hatori's naked body that he was supposed to be used to. Above all else, he felt embarrassed.

How can anyone do x-rated things with their childhood friend so easily? He just casually kissed me without thinking how I would feel about it!

Yoshino only now became angry as he recalled what had just happened. He could not settle down in this quiet room so he turned the TV on even though there was nothing he wanted to watch.

“I'm trying hard enough as it is to make this work.”

As he violently hurled the remote control, his muttered words echoed gloomily throughout the room. He wanted to take the relationship at a reasonable pace because he did not hate Hatori, however, it would just take quite a long time to change the relationship that they had molded in the course of 20 years.

Besides, what should I do about Yuu.....?

All of a sudden, he remembered one more problem. Yuu loved Hatori and Hatori loved Yoshino. But Yoshino loved both of them.

“Hm?”

Yoshino interrupted his own thoughts for he had caught on to something. He certainly did love both of them but was it the same kind of 'love'? His kiss with Hatori was not exactly unpleasant. He did not want to admit it much but he thought it felt good. Even throughout his past experiences, not one kiss had felt this good.

But..... it's not like I'm gay.....

As an experiment, he tried to picture whether he would be able to kiss the young actor on TV.

“---No way!! Definitely NO WAY!”

He shook his head from side to side and threw away this fantasy. He could not express it well with words but it was a matter of instinct and impossible for him, regardless. Then how about if Yanase was his partner?

“.....”

Now he tried to think of doing these kinds of things with Yanase but also could not picture it. Yanase was a dear friend to him and he was, so to speak, like family.

.....I knew it, this means Tori is 'special'.....?

He thought of Hatori in the same way Hatori thought of him, but he couldn't deny this caused him shame. It would be embarrassing to do these things with someone else.

He could kiss Hatori, have sex with him, and allow him to enter him; things he couldn't see himself doing with Yanase. Therefore, Yanase was not the same as Hatori in Yoshino's eyes. In other words, Hatori had become his object of interest before he even realized.

“Wha- whaaaaat!?”

Yoshino exclaimed in surprise at the fact that he only now just realized. His heart started to beat violently and his body temperature rose. He noticed that he hadn't realized he had been clenching his fists and his palms were sweating.

Wha- what should I do.....?

Not knowing what to do, the only thing left for Yoshino to do was to be perplexed and he aimlessly looked around the room while clutching his flushed face in his hands.

「CHAPTER 8」

“Uwa.....”

It was the day of the party and Yoshino was feeling overwhelmed as he stood in the great hall of the hotel, where the occasion was taking place, long after the party had started.

What the heck? Seriously? Practically all the people here are manga artists.....

The place was packed with people talking unanimously with each other. The ratio of men and women was about half and half at this party where artists from the shounen manga department and the shoujo manga department gathered; but it seemed like the women, all dressed up in flashy attire, were particularly lively. As Yoshino nervously stood by the entrance, Yanase came up to him bearing drinks.

“Here. There's no alcohol in it, okay?”

“Thank you. Where am I supposed to be at.....?”

“You should be where all the shounen manga artists are meeting right now. There are many men over there so wear your name tag or no one will know who you are.”

“Ri- right.”

Yanase escorted Yoshino to the meeting place like a pro.

“Yuu, have you ever been to a place like this before?”

“Yeah, I’ve been to these types of places before with my seinen magazine author from another company. It wasn't this huge, though. Maruwaka sure is a popular publishing company. Oh, do you want something to eat, Chiaki? I'll get you something.”

“Get whatever you think tastes good then.”

“Okay.”

As Yoshino stood by an empty table, waiting for Yuu, Hatori spotted him and came over.

“There you are.”

“Geh! Tori.”

Lately he had realized the fact that he couldn't look Hatori straight in the eyes. His face flushed whenever their eyes met.

“What's with that attitude? Where's Yanase?”

“He went to get some food right now. Don't bother with me. I'm handling this just fine, so scram.”

Even if it wasn't for the awkward atmosphere, it would still have been better if he weren't here with Hatori today. If Yoshino accompanied the editor from the Emerald editorial department, he might be regarded as somebody who is part of the shoujo manga department. Though nobody would probably find out his true identity, he still decided it was better to attract as little attention to himself as possible.

Hatori furrowed his brows when Yoshino shooed him away.

“You know, I hope you at least realize that you can't treat the company like this.”

Such words from Hatori annoyed Yoshino greatly.

.....What the hell do you mean by 'treat'? To you yourself, Chiharu Yoshikawa is more important than Chiaki Yoshino anyway.

It wouldn't have bothered him if one of his colleagues had said this, but it bothered him whenever Hatori told him off.

While Yoshino moped around, Hatori called out to stop a group of men passing by.

“Chief editor, do you have a minute?”

“What is it? Oh, Yoshi...no.”

The chief editor of the Emerald editorial department that Hatori had called out to was Masamune Takano. Besides Hatori, Takano was the only person in the editorial department who knew Yoshino's true identity. Even now, Takano must have realized their current location and used Yoshino's real name instead of Yoshikawa. Yoshino felt a little bit relieved to see a person he knew amidst unfamiliar faces.

“Thank you for your continued cooperation.”

“No, thank you. Thank you for going through the trouble of inviting me here today.”

He's as handsome as always.....

He didn't understand why everyone in the Emerald editorial department was so good looking. They looked horrendous just before the deadline, or so he had heard, but when he glimpsed them out of work, they looked as if they belonged to another division in the company. If they said that they were models belonging exclusively to the fashion

magazine division, it would be quite believable. But even the editorial department setting was unusual itself, since it was full of pink, frilly cute things. It seemed like people working within Marukawa Publishing nicknamed it 'the otome department'.

“Thank you for your latest manuscript. Your series is becoming very interesting. I'm looking forward to it personally.”

“Oh...well, thank you.....”

Yoshino didn't receive compliments all that much, so he had trouble responding to such direct praise. Takano changed the subject; perhaps realizing that he was making Yoshino uncomfortable.

“We have a new editor in our company. I was going around and introducing him to everyone just now.”

“Nice to meet you. My name is Ritsu Onodera.”

Onodera modestly gave Yoshino his business card. His facial features were so perfect that Yoshino suspected he was hired because of his face. He was about the same height as Yoshino but his face was small and the position of his hips was high. He had the so-called vogue body type and Yoshino inadvertently observed the young man.

It IS the otome department after all.....

Yoshino realized that now was not the time to be struck with admiration and gave a quick bow of his head.

“Ah, I'm Chiharu Yoshikawa. Thank you for your continued cooperation,” he replied with a soft voice, inaudible to their outer surroundings, as he took the business card. An expression of surprise flashed on the young man's face, who had introduced himself as Onodera.

Figures.....

If people found out that Chiharu Yoshikawa was a man, *everyone* would react like this. Then they would either try to hide their surprise or make a huge fuss by exaggeratingly saying something like 'I thought you were a woman'. But Onodera did not look like he was surprised much further as he bowed politely.

“I should be the one thanking you for your cooperation. I used to be in literature so I'm still new to all of this, but it's really nice to meet you.”



Yoshino liked Onodera's modest, naturally sincere attitude. The fact that the chief editor was tagging along with Onodera was probably because he was in the midst of Takano's training.

"I'm sorry but we're in a hurry so please excuse us. Feel free to stay a little while longer."

As Yoshino watched the two of them vanish into the crowd, he started talking to Hatori, who was patiently standing beside him.

"They got such a young man working for them. Did he graduate recently? I felt extremely young being around him."

"Actually, he's 25. It seems like Onodera used to be in publishing before. I heard he was a literary editor and was in charge of Akihiko Usami."

"Really? That's cool."

He had read only several books by Akihiko Usami, but all the works he had read were subtle and deep. He also heard that Akihiko Usami always kept up his literary style and that he was picky about his work. If one were in charge of someone like that, one would probably be very experienced. He didn't understand why Onodera would transfer to shoujo manga from the world-class department of publishing, but nevertheless, he wanted the Emerald editorial department to succeed.

"He's working extra hard on manga right now since he's a newbie. Takano is seriously putting him through hell with the training, but I hope he doesn't discourage him in the process."

"Eh? Is Takano that horrible?"

"He is a –"

"Ah! Tori-poo, *there* you are~!"

Just when Hatori had started to say something, a group of pompous ladies approached them. Considering their friendly behavior, they were probably authors who drew for the same magazine as Yoshino. Yoshino quickly turned around and took a few steps away so that the ladies wouldn't see him. Thereupon, Hatori took a moment away from the ladies by saying 'excuse me for a minute' and came over to where Yoshino was.

"I'll be done with this soon, just wait until then. There are a few corrections with the storyboard which I received the other day that I have to go over."

Yoshino raised his eyebrows when Hatori whispered this to him.

“Huh? You're going to discuss the storyboard even tonight?!”

“Days like these are meant for work. Besides, it will be a nuisance if I don't do it now. Do you realize how much time it left until the deadline?”

“Urgh.....”

Yoshino was confronted with this fact and it left him speechless. He sank into silence, unable to reply, and Hatori, thinking he had an understanding with Yoshino, returned to where the lady authors were.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting. . .”

As Yoshino quietly gazed after Hatori, he saw how warmly he greeted the ladies.

What the hell...?

The fact that Hatori, who seldom ever smiled at Yoshino, was now so friendly with the ladies made him sick to his stomach. He watched with mixed feelings as Hatori got dragged away by the arm when Yanase returned with the food.

“What's wrong? You're sulking.”

“Ah, no. I'm just hungry.”

“I thought so. That's why I came with all this stuff, so eat as much as you want.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Surely the unpleasantness he was feeling right now was because he was hungry. Surely these feelings will diminish after his appetite was satisfied. Truly believing this, Yoshino silently ate the food that was handed to him.

* * * *

I want to go home already.....

The party was now in full swing, but Yoshino was not enjoying it as he had predicted. He had gone to the specific room and had pretty much met all the people working on the drama, so it was safe to say that he had fulfilled his duty. He would go home right away if he could, but Hatori had told him to wait, so now he had nothing to do. The food was delicious, but he had to eat standing up since there was nowhere to sit,

so he couldn't eat well. And now Yanase was talking to a lot of shounen manga authors, so even when he tried to talk to him, he got interrupted many times.

Yanase certainly did have great art skills and worked quickly, which made him famous for being a legendary super assistant in this industry; many authors constantly invited him, saying, 'Are you interested in signing with us?' But no matter how important the authors were who had asked him this, Yanase always refused the invitations.

“Say, Yuu. Why do you refuse them? You'll be more secure if you signed a contract, right?”

An assistant's paycheck will differ depending on the author who has taken him in. If an author charges high manuscript fees, then naturally the assistant's pay will also be high. One could have a stable income by signing a contract with a popular shounen manga author, for example.

“Chiaki, you dummy. I wouldn't be able to come to your place if I signed with someone else.”

“Thanks for that...”

“Can I sign with you, Chiaki?”

“I'm flattered, but that won't work out. Since our magazine is monthly.”

“Yeah. That's why I'm fine with being free-lance.”

Yanase ended the conversation with just that, but Yoshino was not convinced.

Is that really his only reason?

If Yanase could come to his studio, he would be able to see Hatori. That's why Yanase was with him, right? Yoshino couldn't deny that possibility. He emptied his glass while pondering it over.

“Ah, excuse me. I'll take that one please.”

Yoshino took a fresh drink from the waiter passing by and then Yanase muttered:

“Oh, there's Hatori.”

“Huh?”

He glanced over in the direction Yanase spoke and saw Hatori, over by the table where the desserts were, with a different lady than before sticking close to him. She was a beautiful woman, older than Yoshino, in a low cut dress that showed off her cleavage. It

looked like she was flirting as she stroked Hatori's arm with her fancy fingernails. Hatori was holding a plate with several cakes; perhaps he had been talked into taking the dessert.

He has been surrounded by women this whole time. He keeps saying 'it's work, it's work', but here he is ogling women.

“Ah, if I'm not mistaken that's Erika Ichinose.”

“Hmph, I see.”

Erika Ichinose was an author serialized in the same magazine as Yoshino and made her debut when he was still a high school student, so she fell into the veteran category. In the past, her works were often turned into dramas that ran on prime-time television. Although Yoshino was struck with admiration at how well informed Yanase was, he was puzzled.

But Tori isn't in charge of her.

If he was, they would be discussing the release of her comic or something.

“Hey, if he's not in charge of her, why is she so close to Tori? Who is in charge of her?”

“How should I know? But I hear she's after him.”

“After him?”

“She takes him out to dinner often. Then gets him to walk her home and calls him out to hotel bars, saying she has some things to discuss.”

“Re- really.....?”

For some reason, he felt even gloomier. Pretending to ignore how unhappy he was, Yoshino calmly continued the conversation.

“You know, I suspected that. But where did you hear such a rumor?”

“From other assistants?”

“Oh, yeah.”

Yanase's duty was to go from one author's place to another, so he was full of handy information.

“She might not be as popular as you are now, Chiaki, but she was a big time author once, as you know, and had many fans since she changed the magazines she drew for. You can't be hard on her just because she had many editors. That's part of hospitality, isn't it?”

“Hospitality, huh.....?”

As he listened to Yanase's explanation, he started to feel terribly sick to his stomach. He thought that he would calm down after eating, but perhaps this was a mental thing?

“Just between you and me, I hear Hatori isn't so against the idea, though. He finally gave-in and started seeing her or something. Miss Ichinose is older than him, but she is beautiful and has money. So it's not such a bad thing being a gold digger, is it?”

“What!?”

What the hell.....!

What did he mean by ‘gold digger’? Yoshino felt like protesting, saying that Hatori didn't have a disposition of giving-in like that. Yoshino forced a smile, as he watched Hatori mingle with the author, but anger welled up inside him.

Aren't you supposed to like me!? Like hell we're dating.....

He began complaining to himself, mulling over the circumstances. Were Hatori and him really officially dating? Sure, Hatori had told him 'I love you' and they even had sex, but Hatori had never said 'go out with me' and besides, Hatori didn't even sweet talk him, let alone take him out on dates for all these months. Recently, Hatori had kissed him out of the blue, but it had been far from romantic.

.....I don't get it.

Nothing made sense to him when he thought about Hatori therefore he abandoned these thoughts. When he glanced at Yanase, he saw that he was wearing a mixed expression on his face. Then Yoshino remembered something very important.

Oh yeah.....Yuu likes Tori, too.....

Yanase usually did not reveal his personal feelings. One can safely say that he had a poker face. But the only time he looked like this was when he was brooding over something. It wasn't just Yoshino – even Yanase hated the way Hatori caused him distress. Yoshino unconsciously muttered.

“Gah! Why is he always so popular?”

“That's sudden.”

“Ah, yeah. Tori was always so popular even back in the day.”

“He’s sweet but he doesn't look it, so this contradiction makes him attractive, I guess?”

“Then you think so too?”

“What?”

Crap!

Yoshino blurted that out completely by accident, but the more he tried to fix it, the more he said unnecessary things.

“Umm.....you like Tori too, don’t you, Yuu.....?”

“What are you talking about? There's no way I like that guy.”

“Eh? You don't?”

Yoshino automatically asked because of how extremely abhorrent Yanase's reaction was.

“Why would you think that I like him? That's disgusting.”

Yoshino was surprised at how Yanase spat this out. Seeing as there was not a tinge of embarrassment in his demeanor, Yanase was speaking the truth.

“Honestly.....you're delusional as always. You have all these crazy ideas.....”

“Aha..hahaha.....”

All Yoshino could do in return for Yanase's appalled look was give him a wry smile.

“I don't plan on listening to how you came up with this stupid assumption but instead of thinking about unnecessary things, why don't you work out the plot of your manga instead?”

“So- sorry.”

So I was wrong.....

Yanase nudged him and Yoshino quieted down, disappointed by the fact that the thing he was so worried about this whole time had turned out to be a mere theory. Suddenly, he realized that he was slightly relieved that Yanase didn't like Hatori.

Hold on! What am I relieved for!?”

Didn’t this look like he was celebrating that Yanase was not his rival? While Yoshino’s heart felt troubled, the front stage lit up and the chairman began the closing speech.

“This banquet is in full swing but.....”

After the announcer appeared on the stage, informing the end of the banquet, the attendants gradually flooded outside, happily chatting with one another.

“It's finally over.....”

Yoshino wearily leaned against a table to take some pressure off from his legs, which were in a standing position this whole time. These few hours were torture for Yoshino, who hardly ever moved around since he usually just sat at his desk all the time.

“Good job. You look like you didn't have much fun, though,” Yanase told him, laughing at how fed up Yoshino looked.

“Yeah, well, I think this was a good experience, but I've had enough of it.”

The magnificent atmosphere of the party was new and all, but he did not want to attend one like it again.

“I figured you'd say this, Chiaki. Well then, I have work in the morning tomorrow, so I'm gonna head out.”

“Oh, then I'm leaving too.”

“Is it okay for you to leave? Don't you have a meeting with Hatori after this?”

“Oh!Right.....”

With Yanase's reminder, Yoshino remembered that Hatori had told him to wait. He wanted to get away from work for the day, but he couldn't let Yanase worry over him.

“Thanks for today, Yuu. Sorry I begged you to come here.”

“It's fine! Thanks to you, I ate as much as I wanted. Well then, see ya later.”

“Okay. Take care.”

Yoshino heaved a sigh for the hundredth time and watched Yanase leave.

“Haa.....”

Was Hatori seriously planning on having a work meeting after this? In all honesty, it seemed unlikely that Hatori was inclined to do any more work. Yoshino knew that it was necessary to have the storyboard corrections done immediately, but something surging in his chest made him feel gloomy.

I mean, didn't he say something like he was going to be done soon?

Seeing that Hatori had still not come over to Yoshino, it seemed like he would be unable to escape the party after all. When he looked for Hatori inside the hall, he saw that he was still confined to Erika Ichinose.

By the looks of it, he's being forced to go to the after party.

Naturally, Yoshino could not wait until then, since even the trains will be done for the day by the time that party ends.

He concluded that it probably wouldn't be a problem if he left, but when Yoshino picked up his coat at the check-out, Hatori came running after him.

“Did you forget our promise?”

“I didn't forget, but you look busy to me, so the meeting can wait until tomorrow.”

Unable to make eye contact, Yoshino turned away as he put on his coat.

“What kind of selfish things are you going on about? The storyboard corrections are our top priority. Go back there immediately and wait for me!”

“But SHE is looking for you over there.”

He pointed ahead of him to Erika Ichinose who was restlessly scanning the crowd. She was definitely looking for Hatori, who had disappeared on her. Hatori clicked his tongue as Yoshino left him behind and headed towards the elevator hall.

“See ya.”

“Hey! Yoshino!”

Yoshino hurriedly got on the elevator just before it closed. As expected, it seemed that Hatori was caught by Erika Ichinose, so he had not pursued Yoshino.



* * * *

“Haa.....”

He felt refreshed after coming home and taking a bath, but his mind was still cloudy. Being a simpleton was supposed to be a redeeming feature, but it was hard to be one this time. He couldn't get Hatori and Erika Ichinose out of his head even when he tried. She was really beautiful and had a good figure. Yoshino felt depressed at the reflection of his own body in the bathroom mirror since it was completely different from her body.

Beautiful women are usually preferred over someone like me.....

He felt annoyed at himself for doing nothing but sulking.

“I'm going to bed.....”

Since Yoshino usually wore only a t-shirt inside his home even during the winter, Hatori had once brought him pajamas, telling him 'you'll catch a cold like this'. Now, Yoshino put on these pajamas and left the bathroom.

“Why are you so careless? Didn't I tell you to put on some clothes after taking a bath?”

“Shut uuup. What are you, my mother?”

“Who would force a mother to do this? Here, I brought you pajamas so put them on.”

“How annoying.....”

“What will you do if you catch a cold after taking a bath? Every single winter you get a stuffy nose. It's all because you dress too light.”

On that day, Hatori had brought him several pajamas in a paper bag, which looked like he had bought them at an outlet store.

“.....You seriously nag too much.”

But the only reason he could lead a normal life while living by himself was because Hatori was always there for him. If there was nobody telling him what to do, then his home would probably become even more of a wreck.

“Argh! Stop it already!”

He decided he wasn't going to think about Hatori anymore. Thinking that it'll be easier for him to fall asleep if he drank some beer before going to bed, he opened the door of the refrigerator, which stood in the kitchen, but then heard a noise at the front door.

“No way.....”

The noise was not his imagination or just the sound of the wind. The only people who had a spare key to his apartment were Hatori and Yanase. Yoshino was in dismay when he saw Hatori appear in the living room, looking exhausted.

“I came to discuss the storyboard.”

“Are you kidding me? We'll do it tomorrow!”

“We need to do it while we can, otherwise it's going to be like last time. Did you already forget what happened?”

“.....”

Then I have no other choice now but to quickly get this over with and show him the door.

He did not need to mingle with Hatori after they finish with the storyboard. In the meantime, he decided to sort out his mixed feelings. Yoshino reluctantly obeyed Hatori and headed towards the sofa.

Hm? What's that smell.....?

Suddenly a sweet smell hit his nose. It came from Hatori. It was probably the scent of the perfume left behind by the lady authors, who had been clinging to Hatori at the party. An unpleasant feeling filled his chest, but he told himself to not think about unnecessary things.

“Let's get this *over* with.”

“My words exactly.”

As usual, they sat side-by-side on the sofa with the storyboard spread out on the coffee table. Hatori took off his suit jacket, hung it on the back of the sofa, and took out the storyboard corrections. Then he began explaining the corrections in a low, smooth voice.

“The protagonist doesn't have sufficient monologue on pages 4 through 5. There's only so much that the readers can comprehend through facial expressions alone isn't

there? You should express these emotions not only through drawings, but with words as well.”

“.....”

“Then there's page 15; build up the scene on the previous panel, where she starts crying from having her feelings hurt, and bring it to a climax on page 16. You know what you want to do, but when both your beginning and ending panels hold the same atmosphere, it reduces the dramatic effect, you see?”

“.....”

.....*I can't concentrate.*

He was bothered by the smell of the perfume lingering on Hatori so he couldn't concentrate on the explanations of the corrections. Just how long was Hatori together with her to have her smell transfer on to him? He made up his mind to try not to think about it, but only unpleasant fantasies kept floating into his head.

'Just between you and me, I hear Hatori isn't so against the idea, though. He finally gave in and started seeing her or something.'

They didn't fool around at the hotel, did they?

Yanase's words sprung back into his head and bothered him further. When Yoshino was silent, Hatori, perhaps suspicious by it, asked in a strong tone of voice.

“Hey, are you even listening?”

“.....I'm listening.”

He planned on appearing calm, but irritation was evident in his voice. It looked like Hatori misunderstood his attitude, thinking that Yoshino was unhappy about the storyboard corrections.

“If you're unsatisfied about something, then say so beforehand. I can't have you telling me about it afterwards.”

“.....!”

Why is he so insensitive...!?

Hatori's advice was reasonable but Yoshino was angry at the way he had said it. It wasn't that Yoshino was unsatisfied, it was just that everything he was hearing went into one ear and out the other; but Hatori still had no right to talk to him so arrogantly. No matter how much Yoshino called himself a person hard to upset, he wanted Hatori to

choose his words more carefully. He wouldn't have paid much thought to it if someone else had told him this, but because these words had come out from Hatori's mouth – they were important.

Even if I said that he was the one making me upset, he would just put me down.....

Hatori's word was absolute. That's why sometimes Yoshino just did not want to hear it. When Yoshino shut his mouth and looked down at the storyboard, frowning, Hatori brought down the final blow.

“I'm sure that even you understand that it's horrible the way it is now. I can't publish such a boring story with Chiharu Yoshikawa's name on it.”

“Boring.....huh?”

In his heart, he had no intention of rebelling against Hatori, even though Hatori had said more than was necessary.

Usually, he could cope with it by thinking, 'damn him!', but since he already felt disheartened today, he couldn't bring himself to confront Hatori.

I don't care anymore.....

“.....All right. I'll change this panel like you said and should I add this monologue here?”

Yoshino continued correcting the storyboard just like Hatori indicated for him to do so. He was heedlessly moving his pen over his paper when Hatori grabbed his hand.

“What are you rushing into it for? Aren't you the one who's always saying, 'I'll be the one to decide. You just give me the suggestions'? Think for yourself!”

“I know! I'm just really tired today so I can't think straight!!”

It was his own story, so he wanted to take it seriously, but he just couldn't concentrate on thinking about the storyboard when images of Hatori and that woman flickered in his mind.

“I'm tired too. But I don't whine about it like a child. Put some effort and get to work!”

“I'm trying, but.....!”

“No excuses. If you have all this time to talk with so much self-importance, why don't you spend it on using your own head? What do you think work is for anyway?”

“Oh, isn't that a bit rich coming from the guy who reeks of perfume?!”

“.....!”

Yoshino blurted out on impulse but it seemed like his words had a stronger effect on Hatori than he had expected. At ordinary times, Yoshino would drop his relentless preaching but now, it was unusual seeing Hatori flinch, and it got on his nerves.

“I bet you wish you had gone on a hot date with Miss Ichinose today instead of coming here to my place, don't you? Or, did you come all the way here after you guys had your little fun?”

“Hold on, Yoshino.”

“You're not even her editor and yet she sucks up to you. That's pretty obsessive, wouldn't you say? She was constantly glued to you but even *you* were smiling, looking like you enjoyed yourself.”

“You have it all wrong. We didn't do anything.”

“Then why do you stink of perfume?”

“We were standing close together and the smell must have rubbed off.”

“So was it THAT necessary to stand SO close together that her smell rubbed off on you?! I hear you ‘gave-in’ and started seeing her and what not, but you're actually not very much against it, are you?”

Now that he was all worked up, he couldn't stop the words from spilling out of his mouth.

“Yoshino!”

Hatori's raised tone of voice made Yoshino flinch. Yoshino shut his mouth and Hatori calmly began to question him.

“I'm going out with you, aren't I?”

“.....Who knows?”

“Don't you remember that I confessed to you?”

“I remember! Of course I remember! But you didn't say anything about us going out!”

“Isn't that obvious without me having to say it!?”

“It's not! It's impossible for me to think you're my lover when we haven't done anything since then!”

“Yoshino.....”

Hatori finally fell silent; not knowing what to do about Yoshino who was all riled up and couldn't stop blabbing. Yoshino couldn't bear seeing Hatori like this so he looked away.

What the hell am I saying!?

Yoshino cooled down in the silence that fell on them, but then shame slowly welled up inside him. The way he had said this just now seemed like he felt dissatisfied that they couldn't live like lovers.

Could it be that I'm jealous.....?

That's probably why he had felt so irritated during the party. He had been extremely discontent that other people were all over Hatori because he wanted to have Hatori all to himself.

Yoshino's face turned red the moment he realized this. He awkwardly turned towards the table, so that Hatori would not see the commotion building up on his face.

“.....Anyways, we have to work on the storyboard. No more unnecessary talk, lets hurry and finish it.”

As he gripped his pen and cast his gaze down at the storyboard, Hatori remained silent. But then Hatori's soft voice ended this silence that seemed as if it would carry on forever.

“.....Sorry.”

“Huh?”

“I have no right to criticize you when I was the one who forced my feelings on you.”

“Tori.....”

Yoshino raised his head to the sudden timid tone of Hatori's voice. He cast a side-long glance at Hatori who began faltering, his shoulders drooping more than usual.

“The truth is, I didn't think about what would happen after I confessed because I never planned on telling you. So now, I don't know how to act around you when we're alone or when we're at work. Even I myself regret that I avoided you by making up excuses saying I was busy.”

“.....Um, well, it's my fault too, I guess.....”

Having Hatori apologize to him so meekly stupefied Yoshino. He calmed down; as if his vigor from before had all been an act.

“It's not your fault. Doesn't it bother you that the person you have thought of as your friend confessed to you? It's good enough just having you think well of me.”

“.....”

“Miss Ichinose is one of the authors I hold dear, but we definitely don't have a physical relationship. As for my smiling, I was faking it. Rest assured that she doesn't suit my taste in the first place.”

“Your taste, you say....”

He was at a loss for words because of Hatori's blunt explanation. While Yoshino remained astounded, Hatori continued to honestly explain.

“She is the highlight of the magazine so I can't offend her. The chief editor ordered me to simply keep her company, nothing more. I'm sorry. I should've explained the situation to you ahead of time. “

“Ah, no.....”

This straightforward apology eased Yoshino's pent up feelings from just a while ago. At the same time, his anger also diminished and he felt relieved. Then, Hatori began hesitatingly:

“You...actually prefer Yanase over me, don't you?”

“HAH?”

This crazy question made Yoshino let out a silly cry. He couldn't understand why Hatori would ask such a question.

“He's the one you always seek first, isn't he? You went shopping for a party suit with him when actually I was meaning to go with you.”

“You were about to say that back then.....?”

“This happened on your last trip as well. I didn't even know you two were going until I heard about it from Yanase, so it came as a shock for me, as you would expect.”

Hatori sighed deeply. This was the first time Yoshino had seen Hatori so diffident, so he was at a loss of what to do.

“So- sorry, I figured you were busy.....”

“I understand that you care about me, but I can't be truly convinced even if I do understand this, can I? I don't have the art skills even if I wanted to help you out when you're overloaded with work. I accept that I'm useless when it comes to the manuscript but seeing you rely on Yanase honestly kills me.”

“.....”

He completely had no idea that Hatori was troubled about that. No, he didn't even bother to take notice of it.

So Tori was troubled too, just like I was.....

When Yoshino kept silent, unable to say anything, Hatori laughed in self-deprecation.

“He told me: 'You go all out of your way extending the deadlines for him and you even visit him, but it accomplishes nothing since you're just intruding.' That's certainly true. Even when I'm around you during the deadline week, I only put pressure on you, don't I?”

“I didn't really think that.....”

“Besides, you even refused my kiss, so I didn't know what to do. I think I've forced too much on you.....”

“You couldn't help it...! I'm still embarrassed even now!”

While protesting, Yoshino felt like his feelings of contempt were disappearing, for he now saw that Hatori had also been feeling uneasy.

“Then you don't hate me?”

“.....Who told you that I hated you? I told you to wait but you forced yourself on me..... Of course I was confused when you suddenly did something like that.”

“Yoshino.....”

“Sheesh, why do you hate Yuu so much!? I don't have any desire to kiss or have sex with any guy other than you!!”

Yoshino raised his voice in annoyance, not wanting to look at Hatori being so irresolute anymore.

Hatori widened his eyes at Yoshino's bellow. Yoshino averted his eyes, unable to face the blatant look of surprised on Hatori's face.

Crap, why did I have to go and say that?

“So.....you really mean that?”

Yoshino searched for words that would smooth over the awkward situation but the more he talked, the deeper he dug his own grave. The moment he truly felt like getting out of this situation, his hand, that was digging its nails into the sofa, was seized.

“Then you're okay with it as long as it's not sudden?”

Yoshino did not want Hatori to ask him that so earnestly. He hoped that Hatori would read the atmosphere at times like these. Nevertheless, Hatori patiently waited for Yoshino's answer.

“.....I- I guess.”

Left without a choice, Yoshino gave him a vague answer but then Hatori immediately questioned him again.

“So, can we do it now?”

“N- now!?”

If he said no, he would be going against his word.

Wha- what should I do.....

The atmosphere did not allow for saying 'maybe next time'. After hesitating, Yoshino swallowed and braced himself.

“.....All right.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, as if to say, 'whatever happens, happens', and waited to feel the sensation of Hatori's lips on his. It's bad for the heart to be struck with a sudden kiss, but he nervously waited with anticipation for it. Expecting Yoshino to react like this, Hatori only lightly kissed him and quickly withdrew.

“Tori.....?”

When he slowly opened his eyes, the other's almond shaped eyes were fixated on him.

“You say you don't get it unless I tell you, so I'll tell you many times over. I love you. Only you.So be mine.”

Yoshino averted his eyes in embarrassment because Hatori was staring straight at him while announcing this.

Idiot! You're always so stoic and yet why do you have to go and blab so much now.....!?

It was probably because he was a shoujo manga editor, or perhaps because it was his true character, but Hatori's pick up lines were embarrassing.

“What do you say?”

“.....I'll try.”

Hatori burst into quiet laughter at this weak reply.

“I'm okay with that for now.”

He peered at Yoshino's downcast face and kissed him once more. This time, just another mere peck was not enough. Yoshino started to pull back by reflex but both of his arms were seized, preventing him from moving. A tongue forced his trembling lips apart and excitedly caught Yoshino's own tongue, making his mind go numb.

“Ngh, aah.....mhmm.....!”

The kiss was not rushed like last time, it was full of sweetness in some way. The back of his head was being supported and the more deeply he was being kissed, the more deeply intoxicated he became.

“Nngh.....ngh...! Haa...wait.....”

“Wait again?”

Hatori frowned slightly when Yoshino called for a break in between the kiss.

“It's starting to feel strange somehow so.....”

“We have to finish what we started.”

“Wah!.....Hm!? Nngh, nnggh.....!”

He was pushed down on the sofa and kissed from a different angle than before. Hatori wildly rummaged within his mouth and his whole body instantly became limp. As he tightly gripped at the hem on Hatori's suit, Yoshino found himself surprised at his own hesitation.

The first time had been by force, the second time they had sex was due to the course of the events, but this time, it was neither. He himself decided to do this and his heart beat vehemently to the point that it seemed as if it would burst, since he was so nervous.

“Nngh.....angh...mhmm.....! Aah, no.....!”

“You don't like it?”

“I don't dislike it, but.....we shouldn't do this.”

Yoshino constantly felt like a contradiction. He felt ashamed, because it was like he was being made fun of. As he pouted, Hatori pushed on his hips with his own.

“It's been a long time for me.”

Yoshino's heart leapt at the stiff sensation that struck his thighs. Understandably, a man's erection is a delicate thing. Because of this relationship being homosexual, Yoshino realized that Hatori was holding back.

Why does he like someone like me?

Even Yoshino felt that he himself had said insensitive things sometimes and that he was a rude and irritable person. His body, being pinned down, wasn't soft like that of a woman's. However, the eyes looking down at him clearly desired him. Just being held by their passionate gaze set his body on fire.

When Hatori's cold palms crawled over his hot body through his pajamas, the hair on his skin stood up.

“Aah.....! Mhmm...haa.....!”

“So you wear this, huh?”

“You- you told me to.....wear it.....*Nngh!*”

Hatori kissed him on neck, making his body jump. The tip of Hatori's tongue tickled his skin, and whenever Hatori strongly sucked on it, his back trembled with ecstasy.

“Don't let anyone else undress you besides me.”

“Who...would do that.....? AH.....!”

Hatori skillfully unbuttoned Yoshino's pajamas, revealing bare skin. Reaching to the exposed mid-section, he groped and stroked up the side of Yoshino's thin waist.

“Chiaki.”

“.....!”

This low voice, tinged with sweetness, was too cruel. Just this whisper alone made Yoshino's body tremble.

“Urgh, nngh.....! AAH.....!”

He raised his voice when the tips of Hatori's fingers touched his nipple. As Hatori stroked the small teat in between his fingers, the throbbing in his chest grew heavy. He

hadn't known of this sensation until he had slept with Hatori, and yet he still couldn't believe that having his nipples toyed with like this made him so excited.

“Hya! Ah, aah...idiot, don't lick there.....!”

“Doesn't it feel good?”

“No.....! Shut up.....! Ah, nnggh.....!”

Blood rose to his head when he felt a wet sensation upon the sensitive place Hatori stroked with his fingertips. He tried to push Hatori's head away, thinking that will get him to stop, but his strength left him as Hatori persistently sucked and licked him.

“.....Ah, ngh...ah.....! Haa.....!”

His head grew cloudy as he was being forced to feel this sensation whether he wanted to or not. Little by little, ecstasy outshone his shame and he realized that he had begun to crave this feeling given to him. With his knees bent and his chest being toyed around with, Yoshino himself realized that he was unconsciously trying to rub his hips against Hatori. In a fluster, he pulled his hips away, but Hatori powerfully pressed into his knees as if craving his touch.

“Ah! Ah, no, Angh.....!”

The moment his pajama pants came down, his legs were lifted into the air. Having his private parts exposed like this dyed his cheeks red with embarrassment.

“Wai- no way! Wai- wait.....!”

“You think I can wait at this point?”

“But.....!”

When he was being sucked off the last time, he thought his head would seriously explode from the intense ecstasy and shame. He tried to struggle, thinking to escape somehow, but Hatori firmly held the back of his knees, so he couldn't move freely. Hatori removed everything Yoshino was wearing below his waist while holding his legs up; he slung one of Yoshino's legs on the back of the sofa and bent the other one all the way to his chest. Hatori hid his face in between Yoshino's legs, and this indecent pose bewildered Yoshino.

You've got to be kidding me!

“No! Ah! Aah.....! Nnggh.....!”

As Hatori sucked the delicate place in his crotch and between the soft parts of his thighs, Yoshino's body froze. Yoshino shut his eyes and turned his face away, giving up his resistance. He decided that at the very least he wasn't going to watch what Hatori was doing. However, all he could concentrate on was that particular spot that he was trying to shut out from his sight.

“Aah.....aah.....!”

After stalling for some time, Hatori now pressed his lips against the very essence that aroused Yoshino's excitement. No sooner had Yoshino time to be bewildered by the soft sensation, when Hatori touched the narrow back opening with his tongue.

“Urgh.....! What are you...doing.....? Ah, aah.....!”

Having thought that they were only having oral sex, Yoshino clearly fell into a panic when Hatori directly licked his private back part.

Hatori persistently licked that place, ignoring Yoshino, whose mind and senses failed to keep up. Simultaneously, his member was being rubbed, and cum leaked out from the tip of it. Fingers moved along the shaft, as if spreading the substance that was trickling out; the slimy feeling felt good, overworking him with excitement even more.

“Ah...! No, no.....! Ah, ah, stop.....!”

“You'll get used to it so bear with it a little while longer. Is it that you don't want to do this?”

“Hya.....! No, I can't.....! I'm embarrassed.....angh, aahh...!”

He was at his wit's end, unable to withstand it any longer. He kept begging Hatori to stop, but stopping was not allowed. Before long, Hatori's tongue went all the way inside. Yoshino's eyes began to water at this peculiar sensation of having his soft insides licked.

“Ngh, aahh.....aahh.....!”

Feeling Hatori's finger bury itself inside the saliva soaked opening took his breath away. Each time Hatori's finger moved, stretching his insides, it caused him to exclaim in a shrill voice. He stopped resisting, since it wasn't feeling as tight anymore, and another finger slipped in with a third one following just after. This endless fingering almost brought him to a climax, but right before he was at his peak, the fingering stopped.

Being severely teased like this took practically all of Yoshino's reasoning away.

“Ah, aahh.....! Angh! Stop...do...something...already.....!”

When Yoshino pleaded, unable to withstand it, the finger slipped out from within. He felt an emptiness in his soft insides when there was nothing there. Then he heard the sound of the belt being removed and the rustling of clothes, and after that, he felt a stiff object touch his twitching hole. He raised his head upon reflex, and saw Hatori's furious excitement.

Uwa.....

The moment he took a great gulp at the magnificent the size of it, the stiff object thrust right inside Yoshino.

“KUH!uguu, aah...ah.....aahh.....AAHH...!”

At first Hatori slowly forced his way in, but just when Yoshino had thought that all of it was inside, Hatori thrust in deeper. Yoshino's desire burst out, scattering milky whiteness. Having his soft insides chafed caused a shock. His member trembled from the lingering effect of the climax and his belly was wet with the hot substance.

“.....You're tight,” Hatori muttered as he rocked his hips.

As Hatori jiggled deeply within him, ecstasy arose in Yoshino and a sweet voice escaped from his throat. Hatori shook Yoshino's hips as if churning up his narrow organ and intertwined his own body around Yoshino, whose insides were convulsing.

“Urgh...! *Ah! Ah!* Nngh.....!”

Little by little, the shaking grew more vicious and turned into a rhythmic movement, like that of fingering. As the enthralling motion continued, Yoshino's mind went blank whenever Hatori thrust in.

“Angh! Ah...! Not...there.....Ah! Ah!”

“Here?”

“*AH! Ah!* Noo.....!”

Hatori rammed into his weak spot and thrust up. Yoshino couldn't escape this sensation even if he denied how good it felt.

“Don't! I'm scared.....! Tori.....!”

Whenever he slept with Hatori, a strange sensation arose inside of him. The pain, like that of being unable to breathe, made him feel like crying every time.

.....My chest hurts.

He used this line a numerous amount of times in his manga. And had felt heartache before when he was crushing on a female classmate in the past. But this was the first time his chest hurt so bad like this that it became hard to breathe.

“You're scared? Doesn't it feel good?”

“I don't know.....Ah! Aah.....! Ngh...!”

This deep whispering made him tremble. When he looked up with watery eyes, a snarling kiss befell him. Hatori's tongue thrust in, violating his mouth, and captured Yoshino's tongue by tightly sucking on it. The mixing of their saliva made a wet squelching noise and incited pleasure. Hatori did not stop the rhythmic movements as he devoured Yoshino's lips. Grasping Yoshino's shaking shoulders, Hatori roughly plunged in.

“Ngh...ngh...!*Aahhh*.....!”

The moment their lips parted, Yoshino's lovely voice spilled out from his lips again. He found it very strange that this kind of voice came out from somewhere within him.

“I kiss you and you're tight again.”

“.....Haa..aah...! Angh...!”

“Loosen up a little. I can't move like this.”

“Ah! Ngh...ah...I...can't.....!”

He himself was aware that he was tightly squeezing Hatori's desire. Yoshino's body was out of control. Now that he was aware of it, he felt the heat and the form of Hatori's cock inside of him, as well as its throbbing.

He realized anew that he was sleeping with Hatori, a man, but didn't feel disgusted by it or felt that it was a wrong thing to do at all, and instead was pleased that he was so aroused by it.

“.....I have no choice then.”

“Uwa.....! What are you...!? NNGH.....!”

Suddenly, Hatori put his arm around Yoshino's waist, forcibly lifted him up and straddled him on his knee. Yoshino's body weighed down and deepened their connection. Hatori held him in his arms so Yoshino's stiff member kept poking Hatori's belly so much

that it hurt. Hatori bore into one spot, sweetly paralyzing it, as well as grazing the tip of Yoshino's cock whenever he moved.

“Wha...why like this.....? Aah...Ah! Aahh.....!”

Grasping his waist, Hatori rocked and rubbed Yoshino's soft insides. In an instant, he tightened around Hatori even more. As Hatori rocked his body, he felt his insides melting again. The continuous, profound fingering rhythm suffocated him; made him feel like his innards were gradually rising up. Eventually, he began lusting after this ecstasy and rocked his hips himself.

“Aah...! Ah! Don't...! I'm coming.....!”

“Go ahead – come.”

Hatori shook him so fiercely that he thought he would break. As Hatori violently thrust up, Yoshino saw stars for a brief moment.

“Ah! Ah, *AAHH*.....!”

Hatori's heat slammed into the very depths of Yoshino's body about the same time as it expanded and burst.

After reaching his climax, his member trembled as it overflowed with a milky whiteness. His desire gushed out, leaving evidence by staining Hatori's shirt. The sight of it vividly reflected in Yoshino's eyes.

.....It's not only my fault.

His reason was slowly coming back to him and Yoshino dared to turn a blind eye to it as he tried to lean against Hatori, thinking to support his powerless body on his, but his lips were violated before that could happen.

“Hm?! Ngh...nngh.....*NNGH*.....!”

Hatori didn't just kiss him, he fondled his sweaty skin as well. He massaged his nipples and Yoshino's body turned pleasantly numb all over again. Even though they had just finished, did Hatori intend to continue further? Yoshino desperately broke the kiss apart and raised his voice.

“Wai-...Just what are you thinking.....!?”

“A healthy man in his twenties is not going to stop just yet after waiting for over 3 months.”

“What is this healthy man in his twenties business? You sure have some nerve; you're close to 30.....”

Because Yoshino was appalled, it made his reply sound too serious, but he was pushed down on the sofa again without further adieu.

“Shut up. You have to look cute at times like these.”

“*Fuck that...!* You're the one who likes my un-cute face!”

“Yes. I love it, that's why I want you.”

“.....!”

He choked on his words when Hatori told him such an embarrassing thing so earnestly. Yoshino had lost since he couldn't carry on the argument. Taking advantage of Yoshino's silence, Hatori continued doing whatever he pleased. Yoshino's body, burning up again, wouldn't be able to handle it if Hatori stopped now, so he wasn't too displeased that this was happening. However, Yoshino cursed despite completely submitting anyways.

“Why the hell is this so natural for you.....?!”

“It's not natural. I'm just skilled,” Hatori retorted nonchalantly but for some reason Yoshino knew that Hatori had experience doing this with men other than Yoshino himself. It was probably all a meaningless past for Hatori, but when Yoshino thought about what kind of people Hatori had slept with, his heart ached. Hatori painfully smiled at Yoshino whose own thoughts were hurting him.

“Don't make that face. You're the only person I've ever wanted.”

“Idi-...What are you say.....AAH! Aah.....aa.....!”

Hatori continued the rhythm, making Yoshino lose his mind.

“.....I'm yours.”

“.....HUH?! Ah.....What did you say just now.....?”

“I just said I love you.”

“Liar.....”

Yoshino hadn't expected his lips to be moved like this. Hatori silenced Yoshino's bickering with a captivating kiss that left the matter unsettled. This endless pleasure he was feeling had tricked Yoshino and in the end, he didn't have a chance to ask Hatori to repeat what he had just said.



「CHAPTER 9」

Today, he spent his time unusually peacefully at home. He finished this month's manuscript before the deadline because he learned his lesson the last time. Now that the storyboard for the upcoming issue was complete, he had a few days to spare.

It sure has been a while since I could just chill like this.

“Chiaki, how much longer are you going to read that?”

“Hold on, I'm not quite done yet.”

He woke up late and finished his days reading manga; it was a really blissful time. Today Yoshino spent the afternoon with Yanase reading their shared collection of books (although one might say it was only manga) as if they were elementary students. Yanase wasn't the only one here today, though; Hatori had also come by to discuss the future schedule.

“.....Yoshino. Clean up your desk. I can't lay out the food.”

“Oh, sorry! I'll clean it up right now.”

“Yoshino!”

Hatori raised his voice when Yoshino kept reading the manga while apologizing.

When Yoshino looked up, he saw that Hatori – who was wearing an unflattering apron – was frowning angrily. He quickly cleared away the top of the dining table, transferring the pile of manga onto the sofa.

“Hey Chiaki, what's up with this stack of pamphlets?”

“Hm? Oh, I'm thinking of going on a trip somewhere again.”

Last time, Yoshino had gone on a trip with Yanase and became captivated by the allure of the hot springs, so when he had gone shopping, he had picked up pamphlets from the travel agency. Yanase picked up the pamphlet that was lying on the coffee table and opened it up at the folded page.

“So turbid hot springs are the next on the list, huh?” Yanase muttered absentmindedly as he stared at the glamorous photo of the hot springs.

“When are you planning on going?”

“I think I can afford to go around this time next month. If I finish the manuscript ahead of time, I can go for 3 days and 2 nights, don't you think?”

“You really think that?” Hatori quietly questioned.

“It- it'll be fine! I can do it if I set goals. From now on, if I make a plan, I will make sure to keep to it so that it won't end up like last time.”

“I don't care if you go as long as you finish the manuscript, but if things turn out like last month.....”

“If he himself says that it'll be fine then it'll be fine. Anyways, I want to go to the hot springs too. We can make it if I set up the date ahead of time. The weekdays are the days when it's not crowded.”

Yanase interrupted Hatori's nagging and continued talking about the trip.

“That's true! What to do then.....? Oh yeah, umm...do you want to come too, Tori?”

Yoshino looked at the calendar while thinking about the day of the trip, but then he remembered yesterday's events when he met Hatori's glare. When he nervously tried to invite him, Hatori retorted, looking sullen.

“Did you forget that I'm a salary man?”

“Ah.....oh, right.....”

He forgot because Hatori came over whenever he called for him, even on weekdays, but an editor is an ordinary salary man and basically, their vacations are scheduled with the vacations on the calendar.

Then maybe weekends are better? But Yuu says that weekdays are better.....But then he will definitely sulk again.

Yoshino wouldn't be able to stand it if Hatori became all sulky like last time.

“Anyway, you're caught up in your work on weekends as well. If you don't go on the trip when you can, you'll end up regretting it later on, Chiaki.”

“Yeah...that's true.”

“.....”

“Ah, no, maybe the holidays are better.....”

Having agreed with what Yanase had said, earned him a glare from Hatori, so he disregarded it. As he worried over what the matter was, Yanase dismissed Yoshino's idea.

“He's a workaholic so it can't be helped. The poor guy.”

“I don't see any reason for you to sympathize with me.”

“I'm not sympathizing with you. Just pitying you. Your seasoning is too strong, after all. Too much salt causes high blood pressure. That's why you're always SO angry, right?”

Yanase picked at the side dishes arranged on the table and gave his honest opinion. Yoshino, unable to interrupt the grim atmosphere between the two, just watched them in suspense. Why did Yanase only lash out at Hatori? He had no idea as to why he would do this, since now he knew that Yanase wasn't pretending to act mean to Hatori because he liked him.

“I didn't cook this food for y-”

“That reminds me, have you heard a funny story?”

Yanase interrupted Hatori and selfishly began talking. Just when Yoshino felt relieved that Yanase had stopped arguing, Yanase blurted out an outrageous thing.

“The other day at the party, Chiaki suddenly says to me: 'You like Tori too, don't you, Yuu?' It really surprised me.”

“BAH! Yu- Yuu! What are you talking about?!!”

At this announcement, Yoshino let out a guffaw while choking, despite himself, but Hatori looked awfully disgusted.

“What the hell is that all about?”

“Well, he looked so serious when he asked so it really surprised me. Chiaki, your eyes don't lie.”

“Well...that's cause.....”

He was on a verge of making up an excuse, but because Yanase, grinning from ear to ear, might get witty, Yoshino chose his next words wisely.

“If you say you don't like him, then do you like someone else!?”

“Yep.”

“Oh.....HUHHH!?”

It surprised him when Yanase gave such a blunt answer since Yoshino had thought that he was teasing him. His desire to fight back vanished and now only his genuine interest grew.

“WHO? Do I know her?”

When he pressed him for an answer with interest, Yanase laughed, after pausing briefly.

“Hatori knows this person very well.”

“What? Tori knows her? Who is it? Tell me!”

“.....”

“Why are you both quiet!?”

He switched between them, pressing them for an answer, but they wouldn't tell him no matter how much he pestered them. Hatori just silently glared at Yanase, his eyebrows coming closer and closer together.